

MIKE SHAYNE

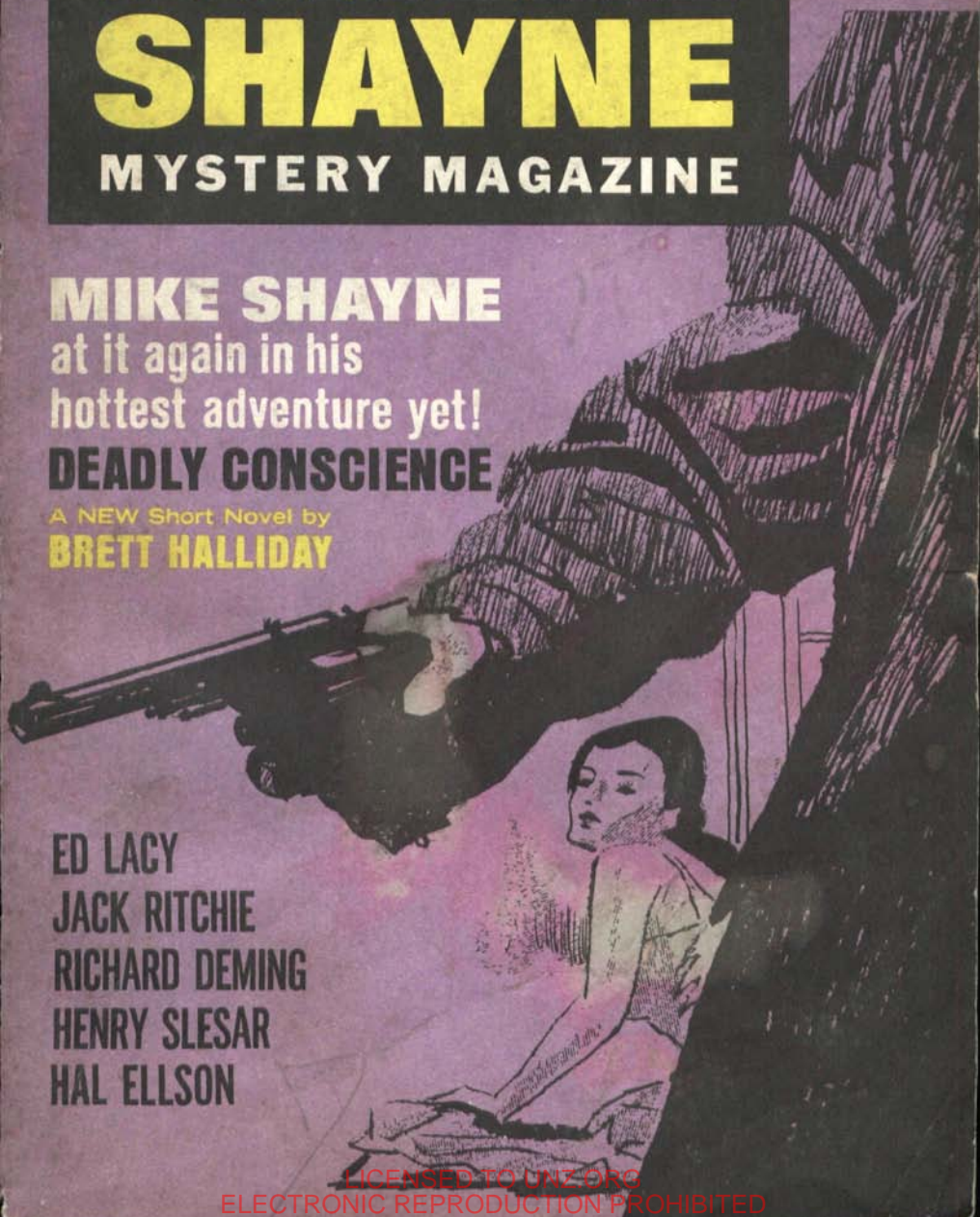
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MIKE SHAYNE



MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NOVEMBER, 1968

VOL. 23, NO. 6

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

DEADLY CONSCIENCE

by BRETT HALLIDAY

In the swamplands, a cornered fugitive sought to gun down the man who had ruined his life, and Mike Shayne, remembering his promise to a girl's battered, dead body, took on his most dangerous, bullet-studded quest of all.

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A NEW COMPLETE MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL



DEADLY CONSCIENCE

*Plunged in the middle of a gangland war,
Mike Shayne took a last desperate gamble to
avenge a girl whose last lover was Death.*

by **BRETT HALLIDAY**



MIKE SHAYNE leaned across the desk of his private office toward the tall, handsome gray-haired woman. His voice was harsh.

"You want me to help Manny Dingan? Why should I?"

"No. I want you to help my husband, Mr. Shayne," Mrs. Emmanuel Dingan said quietly. "There's a difference. I guess you know that."

Shayne leaned back, his gray eyes hard. "Is there? No, I don't think so, Mrs. Dingan. Manny Dingan is still Manny Dingan, pub-

lic racketeer or private husband. I don't help his kind."

"And my kind, Mr. Shayne?"

The tall, quiet woman looked steadily at Shayne. There was something strong, yet soft and composed about the wife of the infamous racket boss.

Manny Dingan was known, and hated, by half the cops of the United States, but this woman was his wife, and . . .

Shayne didn't finish the thought.

"You're saying it's you who needs help, not Manny?" he said.

"Yes," she said, "but even Manny Dingan can have private troubles."

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"I don't give a damn about Manny Dingan's troubles, public or private, except to hope he has enough to put him in jail!"

She nodded slowly, and reached into her fine black leather handbag. She extracted a cigarette and lit it. She blew smoke. She looked at Shayne:

"I understand, Mr. Shayne. Of course, a public enemy. But did you ever think about the woman married to a gangster? I'm Manny Dingan's wife. I know what Manny Dingan has done, and is doing, but I'm his wife. I know the man. When you're in a position like that you have to forget what your man is, and remember only who you are.

"I'm his wife, period. I worry about what he eats and whether or not he wears his sweater on cold days. When he dies I'll cry for him."

There was a silence. Shayne tugged on an earlobe. He liked Mrs. Mabel Dingan.

"All right," Shayne said. "Tell me the story. I'll try to think of him as only your husband with troubles—private."

"Thank you," Mrs. Dingan said softly.

"Start at the beginning."

She smoked. "The beginning? God knows when that was. With Manny it's hard to tell just when any troubles began because he spends his life in some kind of trouble. Let's just say it has come

to me slowly that Manny has some problem on his mind that isn't part of the rackets."

"How did it come to you?"

"You have to know Manny," she said. "All the years I've lived with him I've never known him to show any disturbance, not—not even when I've learned later he's been close to being killed by some of his 'associates.' Lately he's been—well, disturbed."

"How?"

"He's been acting odd for him. Usually he's cool and quiet and very alert. The last few months he's been nervous, distracted, sleeping badly, talking in his sleep."

"What does he say?"

She shook her head. "Gibberish, but almost crying, in a kind of pain. And he's been going off, taking short trips he doesn't tell me about."

"I expect he's often taken short trips without telling you about them."

"No. He takes trips, yes, but he always gave me a reason, if not the real one. Now he's hiding the trips from me. That's why I know it's personal. Also, his 'friends' don't know about the trips. Some of them have called, and they seem surprised when I say he's away. They sound suspicious."

"So you think he's got some problem the boys don't know about?"

"Yes," she said. "And that's

what scares me. They don't like strange actions. I think he may be in real deep trouble if he keeps it up."

"In other words, you think he's involved in something private, and the racket boys might not like that?"

"That is one of the fears on my mind, Mr. Shayne. But mostly I'm concerned for Emmanuel. Something is tearing him up inside, and I want to know what it is and help if I can."

"Why not ask him?"

"If he wanted me to know, he'd tell me. I—I'm afraid, too, that I may be part of the problem, whatever it is."

Shayne considered the woman. She was saying that, like wives all over the world, she was worried about some private actions of her husband that he was hiding from her. But her husband was not like husbands all over the world. He was Manny Digan, big man in the rackets, and Shayne did not think that Manny Digan did much that was innocently private.

"So what you want is for me to find out what Manny is up to, what's bothering him, and maybe, keep an eye on him to see that the boys in his circle don't get the wrong idea, if it is all private and innocent."

"Yes, Mr. Shayne, that's what I want. The worried wife, nothing more."

"And if what he's doing is some-



thing that's part of his normal illegal work?"

"Then I suppose he'll hate me," Mrs. Digan said quietly, "perhaps worse. I know the danger. I would not be here if I was not absolutely sure that Manny's problem is not part of his—work."

Shayne rubbed at the stubble of his gaunt chin. He did not like helping Manny Digan, and liked even less poking around in the dark on what might well be some racket activity. That way lay big danger. Still, he liked Mabel Digan, and a worried wife was a worried wife, no matter who her man was.

"All right, Mrs. Digan. You can give my secretary a small retainer, say twenty-five dollars."

"Isn't that rather little?"

"Yes," Shayne said bluntly. "It just gives me the status of working for you. If Manny turns out to be in private trouble I can help with, I'll bill you. If it turns out to be some racket deal, then I'll be working against you, and I wouldn't want your money."

Mrs. Dingan seemed to grow rigid. She sat like that for a full minute while Shayne waited. Then she let her breath out very slowly.

"Very well, Mr. Shayne. I should be accustomed to that by now. Just help Manny if it is possible for you."

After she had gone, Shayne lit a cigarette and sat with a heavy frown on his gaunt face. Moments later, Lucy Hamilton came into the private office. The pert, brown-eyed secretary held a check in her hands and half extended it toward Shayne. Her face was a mask of puzzlement.

"Mrs. Emmanuel Dingan?" Lucy said, questioned. "Manny Dingan? And you're working—"

"She wants help, private," Shayne said. "I guess she's a human being. Maybe even Dingan is."

Lucy just stared for a moment. Then she nodded. "Of course, Michael. Yes. You'll help her?"

"If I can, Angel," Shayne said. "If I can."

Lucy nodded, smiled, and left. Shayne continued to smoke, and continued to frown. He did not exactly like the prospect of digging,

unasked, into Manny Dingan's life. But it looked like that was just what he was going to do.

II

MIKE SHAYNE was aware that he would have to use every skill he had learned over a lot of years to tail Manny Dingan without being spotted.

Dingan had lived his life with the possibility of a tail every hour of the day.

He picked up the racketeer at his home the morning after Mrs. Dingan had hired him. The first view he had of the small, stocky gangster was from the corner, with Dingan standing on the front steps of his elegant house, apparently saying good-by to Mrs. Dingan.

Shayne swore to himself as he saw the woman glance around four or five times—looking for him!

Dingan did not seem to notice. The stocky gangster got into his gray Lincoln and drove straight past Shayne without even a glance. Shayne took up the cautious tail. But he soon realized that Manny Dingan was not acting like a man who was concerned about a tail job.

By the second day it was clear to Shayne that Manny Dingan was indeed a man with something on his mind. The racketeer seemed to have forgotten all his normal caution, and Shayne had no difficulty

sticking close to Dingan by car or on foot.

For these first two days Dingan did nothing that made Shayne wonder. The racketeer went to his office—The Tuscan Export Company, specialists in mass-produced statuary with hideous samples in a show window to prove it—and seemed to conduct his normal business, which had little to do with statuary.

Shayne could have seen most of the faces he recognized going in and out on the wanted posters of half the police stations in the country.

It was a chilling sensation to sit in his car and watch all the dangerous faces and know that if one of them spotted him they would not ask many questions about why he was staking them out.

Beside his office, Dingan visited his barber shop—the mania for gangsters to have themselves shaved and barbered by professionals had always intrigued Shayne. Dingan visited his club, the offices of fellow racketeers, and a few large and respectable houses that housed equally large but not so respectable gang lords. Nothing seemed suspicious.

Then, on the third day, Dingan deviated twice from what seemed to be his normal routine. Just after lunch, Dingan came out of his club and instead of driving back to his office drove a few blocks from his club. He parked in a private lot

beside a three story medical center building and went inside.

Shayne managed to park and get out fast enough to be only a few paces behind Dingan as he entered the lobby of the building. He couldn't get any closer without risking being spotted. Dingan did not pause at the reception desk, but went straight to the elevator and Shayne heard only a quickly barked floor number: "Three."

Shayne turned to the reception desk.

"I'm looking for Mr. Dingan, Miss," he told the motherly looking guardian. "From Tuscan, his company. Something he has to know."

She didn't even look up. "Dingan? Let me see," and she looked through a large book. "Emmanuel Dingan, yes. He's in three-hundred-twenty-two. Dr. Bokar."

"Thanks," Shayne said, and headed for the elevator as if in a hurry.

He rose up to the third floor, and walked along to 322. A solid door bore the simple legend: *Dr. K. Bokar, M.D.* There was nothing else on the door, not even office hours, and Shayne could not risk barging in. He waited a suitable time for the delivery of a message, and then went back down and out to his car.

Exactly one hour later Manny Dingan came out. The stocky gangster walked fast, with a jerky motion, as if his mind was still

somewhere else. Dingan did not look happy, not at all. Shayne wondered: what was Dingan doing visiting a doctor? It could be the whole answer, if Mrs. Mabel Dingan didn't know about the doctor.

He had no time to stop and call Mrs. Dingan now, or he would lose his man. He followed the gray Lincoln, and it did not drive back toward the offices of Tuscan Export. It drove erratically, twice barely beating red lights, and once hitting the brakes so hard at a changing yellow that the car between Shayne and the Lincoln almost hit the Lincoln. Dingan had things on his mind.

Shayne followed all the way to a section of small cottage-type houses that had once, long ago, been some kind of tract development but where now the cottages were all in various states of disrepair. There were fewer people and less traffic here. Shayne had to fall back and be more careful.

Dingan finally parked in front of a once-white cottage with a heavily overgrown yard. The racketeer got out and walked into the yard as if he knew it well, but he stopped and knocked at the door.

Shayne drove past just in time to see the door open. A young woman opened the door, smiled at Dingan, and stood aside to let him enter.

By the time Shayne had parked and returned on foot there was no

sign of anyone. He slipped around to the side and approached the house through trees and the tall weeds. He reached a window, and raised up carefully.

Manny Dingan sat on a couch. The woman sat facing Dingan. Each had drinks and they seemed to be talking. But it was an odd scene. Dingan was perched as if his back was made of steel. The woman wasn't really a woman at all, but a girl, no more than twenty. She seemed to be doing most of the talking. Dingan had a severe, abstracted expression on his rugged face.

Shayne watched them for some time, but nothing happened. They just sat and talked. Then, the girl smiled and stood up. She went into another room. Dingan followed her. Shayne crept away from the house and worked his way back to his car—unseen, he hoped.

In the car he lit a cigarette and sat down to wait. A doctor, and now a girl. He didn't know if Mrs. Dingan knew about the doctor, but he had a strong hunch she didn't know about the girl.

He waited two hours before Dingan came out. By then he had his third unusual development of the day. A large blue sedan passed in front of the cottage for the fourth time. He had taken the license number the third time—and shifted his own parking spot—and when the blue sedan came by the fourth time he knew it was the

same car, and it did not see him.

Someone else was tailing Manny Dingan.

III

WHEN DINGAN finally came out, Mike Shayne was well hidden up the driveway of an empty house, and the blue sedan was just as well hidden up the block. Hidden from Dingan, not from Shayne.

Dingan climbed into the Lincoln and drove off, oblivious to the double-tail. The blue sedan took off in pursuit, and Shayne went off as the third member of the parade. Dingan seemed to still have no idea he was under scrutiny and drove straight back to his home.

The blue sedan did not stop but drove on and vanished before Shayne could adjust to tailing it. The redhead went on to the nearest tavern, where he stopped for sidecar and a telephone call.

He made the call first, to Mrs. Dingan. She was home and she answered herself. Her husband was taking a swim.

"Do you know that your husband is seeing a doctor?"

"A doctor? No, I didn't know. You think that—"

"Maybe," Shayne said. "I'll check back with the doctor."

There was a pause. "Very well, Mr. Shayne. Is there anything else?"

Shayne hesitated. There was a lot more—a girl and a blue sedan



LUCY HAMILTON

—but he decided to keep that part to himself for now. It had occurred to him long ago that Mrs. Manny Dingan might not be as innocent as she seemed. For all he knew she and Dingan were using him for something that would not turn out to be any Girl Scout cookie-bake.

"No, not yet, Mrs. Dingan," Shayne said.

"If you find anything serious at the doctors, you'll tell me, Mr. Shayne?"

"I'll tell you," Shayne said.

He hung up and sighed aloud. If Manny Dingan had good reason to hide what he was visiting a doctor for, maybe Shayne would keep the gangster's secret. Even a gangster had some human rights.

In his car he lit a cigarette and considered his action. He had lost the blue sedan. The doctor's office would be closed. Dingan was home, but might come out again. The girl in the cottage could be the

whole answer—a very common answer.

He could not be everywhere at once and it was too late to hire someone else.

The girl looked like the best chance.

He started up and drove off back toward the dilapidated tract of cottages. When he neared the girl's cottage he slowed and his gray eyes searched the twilight for any signs of the blue sedan or any other suspicious watcher. He saw nothing.

He parked a block from the cottage. He walked back and saw that there were lights on in the front rooms. Someone was at home. Shayne loosened the automatic in his shoulder holster. He looked around again for any signs of anyone watching the cottage. Again he saw nothing, and knocked on the door.

Quick female footsteps came toward the door, and the door opened at once.

The girl who stood there blinked at Shayne.

"Yes?"

"May I talk to you a minute, Miss?"

"Talk? About what? Who are you?"

"The name is Shayne, Mike Shayne. I want to talk about Manny Dingan," Shayne said, and watched her closely for a reaction. He got none.

"Dingan? I don't know anyone

named Dingan. You must have the wrong house."

"No," Shayne said, inching inside the door, "this is the right house. A short, stocky man in his fifties. Dresses well. Today he wore a dark gray suit when he called on you."

"Today?" she said. "Oh, you must mean Mr. Danton. Don't tell me he's been using a phony name, too?"

"I guess he has," Shayne said. "May I come in, Miss—"

"Mrs. Fitch, Anne Fitch," the girl said. "Come in. Has Mr. Danton, or Dingan, done something?"

"That depends," Shayne said.

The girl, Anne Fitch, had walked him into a small but tidy living room. She indicated a chair, and Shayne sat down. He was watching her closely and what he saw puzzled him. She did not act like a girl with anything going on, she did not seem to know who Dingan was, and talking about the racketeer did not seem to make her nervous.

"Well, you're certainly here for something," Anne Fitch said. "Are you from a collection agency? I'm afraid Mr. whatever-his-real-name-is happens to be a bit eccentric."

"It's no trouble he's in, unless he's in trouble with you. Miss Fitch."

"Mrs. Fitch, I told you," she said. "In trouble with me? You mean like that? I mean, him and me? Oh, boy, are you way off."

"Then why does he come here? Today wasn't the first time."

"Hell, no. He's been coming a couple of times a week ever since Joe was sent away. Joe, he's my husband. He . . ." Her open and honest eyes suddenly clouded and she stared at Shayne. "You're a cop! Are you here about Joe? What more do you want, you've got him! He—"

She stopped, fright on her pretty face. "Is Joe in trouble? Has something happened up there?"

"Number one, I'm not a cop, Mrs. Fitch," Shayne explained. "I'm a private detective. Number Two, I don't know anything about your husband Joe. He's in prison?"

She watched Shayne with deep suspicion. Shayne suddenly knew all about her—a young wife who had married a man in some form of crime and was only now trying to learn just how to act. There wasn't a tough bone in her body, but the expression on her face was straight out of early Hollywood gun-moll movies.

Shayne said gently, "What did he do, Anne? How old is he?"

A sadness mixed with anger came over her pretty face. "He's twenty, like me, and he didn't do anything! Nothing, and they sent him away for three years!"

"For a three-year jolt he must have done something."

"He and two other boys stole some motorcycles and roughed up some rich kids who gave them

trouble, that's all," Mrs. Anne Fitch said. "Poor Joe, he's wild, but that's all. He even had a job."

"What does Dingan come here for?"

But her mind was still on Joe Fitch, boy-in-trouble bigger than he had expected when he probably stole a motorcycle for a joyride. There was probably more to it than Anne Fitch knew. You don't get three years for a first-offense of that kind.

"Poor Joe," she said, and then her eyes flashed at Shayne. "But he'll be okay when he gets out, see?"

"I'm sure he will, Anne," Shayne said. "Tell me about Manny Dingan."

"What? She blinked. "Oh, him. I don't know anything about him. He's a funny old bird I met in a bar a couple or three months ago. At first I figured it was a pick-up, and that made me mad, what with Joe not gone a month. But he kept after me—just talking, you know. Nothing funny, no passes. So I let him buy me a few beers, and we got to talking about Joe, and he seemed interested."

"So you got friendly, and after a while he started to come here?"

"He seemed lonesome. So I offered to cook him a dinner. He acted happy as hell."

Shayne could imagine Manny Dingan acting happy about a home-cooked meal from a twenty-year-old. Dingan would be an ex-

pert at getting close to anyone he wanted to. The question was—why?

"Then when he'd started coming here regularly he made his move? You felt sorry for him? Did he offer to help Joe, and sort of help you while Joe was away?"

She shook her head seriously. "No. That's what I figured he had in mind. But it wasn't. He never made a pass, never offered to set me up or help Joe. I figured he was just what he seemed to be, a lonely guy without no money and nowhere to call home. We talked, that's all."

"Talked about what?"

"Me and Joe, what we wanted, our backgrounds, all that. I tell you, Mr. Shayne, Mr. Danton, or Dingan, I guess, is a hell of a good listener. He got more out of me about myself than anyone ever did, and he made me feel he understood. I like him!"

"I expect he's pretty likable," Shayne said drily. "What else did you talk about?"

"Everything. I mean, you know, just what people talk about," Anne Fitch said. "What's this all about, Mr. Shayne? Is Mr. Dingan in trouble?"

"I don't know, to be honest. Was Joe mixed up with anyone, Anne? I mean, any crooks, racketeers?"

"Of course not!"

"Did you ever get the idea Mr. Dingan knew Joe? I mean, before he met you?"

"No. Why don't you tell me what you want to know about Mr. Dingan for, and then maybe I can help."

Shayne stood up. "I can't tell you, Anne, and maybe you have helped. Stay put. I'll be back."

She shrugged. "I'm not going anywhere."

Shayne left her sitting there in the living room, and let himself out. As he stepped out the door, and started up the block toward his car, he became aware of the blue sedan again. It was well-hidden in a driveway, but he was looking for it, and he saw it.

He walked on to his car without glancing at the sedan, got in, and started off. He watched his rear-view mirror.

The blue sedan eased out of the driveway, without lights, and came slowly after him.

IV

MIKE SHAYNE drove with care, not too fast, to tip the blue sedan that he knew he was being followed and wanted to evade, not too slow, to tip them that he knew he was being followed and did not want to lose them.

He wanted to see what they would do, the vague shapes back there in the blue sedan.

What they did was nothing. They followed, and nothing more. Shayne led them through half the city as evening turned into night

and they neither went away nor moved in. They just sat back and followed.

When Shayne was sure of this, that all they were out to do was keep him under scrutiny, he began his moves to lose them. They would find him again, but he had no intention of being tailed easily.

He watched the lights carefully, and when he spotted a yellow about to turn, and a policeman at the curb, he gunned through the yellow by a hair and left the blue sedan sitting behind the red with the policeman staring after him, and looking at the blue sedan as if daring them to try to run the red.

Grinning to himself, Shayne did a few sharp twists and turns down side streets until he was sure that they could not pick him up again this night, then straightened his course for Miami Police Headquarters.

He went up to Chief Will Gentry's office. The Chief was in, as usual, but busy. Shayne waited. After a half-hour three annoyed looking politicians came out of Gentry's office and Shayne went in.

The bluff Chief of Police was staring out his window at nothing but darkness. Gentry was never happy with the politics of his job that took so much of his time these days. Shayne waited for his old friend to calm down.

Gentry swivelled around. "Hello, Mike. Got a problem?"

"A police problem."



"A breath of fresh air," Gentry growled. "What is it?"

"What do you know about a robbery involving a kid named Joe Fitch?"

"A robbery? What kind?"

"Motorcycles, joy-riding, and a brawl, but I think there has to be more. Fitch got a three-year handle."

Gentry chewed on his cold cigar stub, and leaned forward to bark into his intercom. Then he sat back and his heavy eyes half-closed. Shayne waited in the silence. Gentry was back thinking about the non-police part of his job in a city that grew bigger every day.

After a time a uniformed officer came in and laid a folder on Gentry's desk. The Chief did not move until the officer had left. Then Gentry leaned forward, opened the file, and read in silence for a time. The Chief nodded.

"Joseph Fitch, twenty, male Caucasian. With two companions

stole three motorcycles from the Honda salesroom on Flagler, took them joyriding, got into a nasty brawl with four high school boys at a hamburger drive-in."

"That's all?" Shayne said.

Gentry closed the file and leaned back. "No. When the officers arrived and collared Fitch and his buddies, the drive-in was deserted. They found the counter-man out cold in the back, and the register open and empty. Fitch and his pals had four hundred dollars on them.

"When the counterman was brought around he swore Fitch had sapped him after the fight with the high school kids. He was able to identify some of the money—he'd written code numbers on some of the bills ready for deposit. It was pretty clear that Fitch and his buddies, finding the drive-in deserted after their brawl, had just figured they could grab the cash."

"Spur-of-the-moment robbery?"

"That's the way we read it, and the D.A. told it. A Legal-Aid lawyer had Fitch and the others plead guilty to second-degree burglary, and the D.A. went along as first offenders. So they got three years."

Shayne thought about it. It was more than Anne Fitch had told him, but it was still really not much more than a wild kid making a dumb play. It had probably looked like a hell of a funny trick to three boys already hopped up by their joy-ride and fight.

"What do you have on Fitch's background?" Shayne asked.

Gentry opened the file again. "Comes from upstate, a small town called Seminole Landing. Usual high school record, good marks but a wild reputation. Came down here about a year ago and got married. Held a job driving a truck for an express outfit, but was learning the office work. They were high on him, except he was 'undisciplined.' That's it."

Gentry closed a file and looked at Shayne. "It looks like an old pattern, Mike. Bright enough kid, but hard to handle. Some grow out of it in time, some don't get the chance. Three years inside won't do him any good."

"No gang connections, Will? No previous record? No bad companions?"

"Nothing on his record. Seminole Landing is a small town, and the probation people got a pretty full rundown on him at the time of the trial. All normal, except, as I said, kind of wild, chip on the shoulder stuff."

"Okay, Will, and thanks for the information."

"What's your interest? Relatives?"

"I've been talking to the wife. She's a nice kid who's taking it pretty well and has hopes."

"I hope her hopes come out," Gentry said, "but that didn't answer my question. A client?"

"Yes, but not much connection.

My job just happened to cross Joe Fitch's path."

"Let me know when you see a connection I might want to hear about."

"I'll do that, Will," Shayne said.

He went back down to his car, absently acknowledging the greetings of various detectives he knew in the building. His mind was on Manny Dingan who had picked up a pretty young girl for no apparent ulterior motives. Impossible. Manny Dingan never did anything without a reason.

He still thought about it all the way home. The blue sedan was nowhere in sight as he drove. Who was it in the blue sedan? Mrs. Dingan had hired him to find out what private trouble her husband had. Who had hired the blue sedan, and what kind of trouble did that person think Manny Dingan had?

When he reached his apartment-hotel he made the turn into the down ramp for the underground garage—and spotted the blue sedan a block away, slightly too close to a street lamp. Careless. The car was just sitting there with a clear view of all the exits from Shayne's apartment-hotel.

Shayne did not slow down on his way into the garage. He did not want them to know they had been spotted again.

Once in his room he double bolted the door, in case they got any ideas, and laid crumpled news-

paper around the door. Then he went to bed.

He was tired, it was always tiring to spend three days tailing a man, and he slept like a baby.

Once he awakened and went to the window. He could see the blue sedan. It was still there.

But nothing disturbed his sleep.

V

SUDDENLY THE PHONE blasted in his ear, and Mike Shayne jerked awake with a blazing sun in his eyes. He had forgotten to lower the shade after his nocturnal observation of the blue sedan.

He picked up the receiver.

"Shayne," he growled thickly.

"And still in bed," Will Gentry's never-sleepy voice said. "I should have quit years ago and joined up with you."

"You like power too much," Shayne said. "What's up, Will?"

"I don't know," Gentry said bluntly. "Last night you come and dig into a two-bit case worth no one's time, and today that two-bit case is suddenly at least gold-plated."

"What's happened?" Shayne snapped, fully awake now. Had Dingan made a move?

"You wouldn't have an idea, would you, Mike?"

"No, Will, I wouldn't."

"Joseph Fitch broke jail last night. Got clean out of the State Penitentiary. Still at large."

Shayne's hands gripped the receiver hard. "How, Will?"

"They're not sure yet. It was a real clean break, not discovered until about six this morning. It looks like he used the old hospital routine, got out in an ambulance. There's an ambulance missing, and they transferred a serious case last night."

"Any outside help?"

"They don't know," Gentry said, "but there usually has to be, Mike. So far they don't have any leads to show it wasn't a one-man caper, but the odds are against it."

"So he's been gone at least ten hours?"

"About. They called us as soon as they realized he had too much start to be still around the prison."

"What about Seminole Landing?"

"They're alerted, too. Mike? You're sure you don't have anything to tell me?"

"No, not yet. Believe me, Will, I don't have even a good guess."

"Okay. When you do," Gentry said, and hung up.

Shayne swung his legs over the edge of the bed and reached for a cigarette. He had not told Gentry the exact truth. He had a guess about Manny Dingan, but it was only a guess with nothing behind it.

He reached for the telephone again and dialed the number of Manny Dingan's palatial house. He got some servant this time, and asked for Mrs. Dingan. He whis-

tled while he waited. She came on bright and agitated.

"Mr. Shayne? Have you—"

Shayne broke in. "Is your husband at home, Mrs. Dingan?"

"No," she said, and there was uneasiness in her voice. "He went out late last night and has not returned."

"How late?"

"About two."

"Have you heard from him?"

"No," she said, "but I think there are some men watching the house now."

"Blue sedan?"

"No, a black coupe."

"Do you have any idea where your husband went?"

"None at all. Do you?"

"Not yet. I'll get back to you."

He hung up and started to dress. He went downstairs and crossed the street to the luncheonette. He wanted a quick breakfast, and a good look at the street. The blue sedan was gone—or, at least, not in sight—but a man was standing against a wall up the street, busily reading a newspaper.

After his breakfast he went back into his apartment-hotel and went down to pick up his car. He drove out into the sun, and headed for the medical center where Manny Dingan had gone yesterday. No blue car followed him that he could see—but other cars moved behind him.

At the medical center Doctor K. Bokar, M.D., was not yet in his of-

fice, and would not be until eleven o'clock. Shayne went back to his car and headed for the small cottage of Mrs. Anne Fitch. He still could spot no tails, but that could mean only that more expert men had taken up the tail.

When he parked in front of the small cottage he saw that the shades were still down, and there was no sign of activity. As he neared the door he again opened his coat and loosened his automatic in its holster. He watched for any sign of movement. Especially at the windows. He saw nothing.

He listened and heard nothing. Then he circled the house, ready to dive for cover, although it was not very likely that Joe Fitch would have returned here to hole up. He saw nothing and no move was made against him.

It was a thousand-to-one that Anne Fitch was long gone to join her fugitive Joe, but the girl was no expert, and there was a good chance she would have left something behind to give Shayne a lead.

He returned to the front door and rang.

He waited.

There was no answer, no sound of high-heels tapping from inside. Shayne nodded grimly and tried the door. It was open. He pushed it in slowly, and drew his automatic. The small hall was deserted.

Shayne stepped inside. He closed the door quietly behind him and stood listening. There was no

sound at all in the small cottage. The living room to Shayne's left was fully visible and empty. A glass and a half empty beer bottle stood on a table.

Shayne looked into the tiny dining room. It was neat and deserted, like a tomb that has been kept in memory of some long gone person.

The kitchen yielded no more, except that it showed the obvious signs of recent use. The remains of a dinner were still on the dishes piled at the sink ready for washing—a solitary dinner.

Obviously, Anne Fitch had had her lonely dinner, then had a beer in the living room before washing the dishes. Something had prevented her from finishing the beer or returning to the dishes. A sudden telephone call, maybe?

The bedroom was the last room in the house. Shayne peered in with his automatic ready but no longer urgently ready. His gray eyes turned to flint.

He had found what had suddenly interrupted Anne Fitch in her solitary beer.

Death.

VI

SHE LAY ON the bed, curled into a ball as if trying to hide from some horror. A pool of blood had already begun to dry all around her head. Her face wasn't a face at all, it was a pulp of torn flesh and bro-

ken bones, but the real bleeding had come from inside.

Mike Shayne touched her. She was cold, stiff already. He looked down at her and knew how she had died. She had been beaten to death—slowly. The marks were all there. She had been beaten slowly to make her tell what someone wanted to know.

Whether she had told or not Shayne couldn't know, but he thought that she had not. She had died during the process of interrogation. Otherwise, if she had given them what they wanted, her death would have been quicker, from something sudden and sure like a bullet.

Yet he did not think she could have held out under the horrible beating. Almost no one could have. So she probably had not known whatever it was her killers had wanted to know.

They had not, of course, believed her—men who would do what had been done to her would never believe that their victim simply did not know what they demanded she tell them.

Shayne sat down, and lighted a cigarette, and waited for the anger, hate and sickness in him to subside. He smoked in the silence and aura of death, and thought about Manny Dingan.

And he thought about a violent young escaped convict. Maybe it hadn't been interrogation. Maybe it had been a young wife trying to

make her husband go back to jail.

After a time he got up and searched the whole house. There wasn't much to search. Anne Fitch had not acquired much in her brief life, and what she had had was cheap and pitiful. Shayne found nothing to give him a clue to either her killer, Joe Fitch, or anyone else. Except a letter from Mrs. Angela Fitch, with an address in Seminole Landing, Florida.

He called Gentry and reported the killing. Then he called Mrs. Dingan, but the servant who had answered earlier reported that Mrs. Dingan was not home, and Mr. Dingan was also still not home. Shayne lit another cigarette and sat down in the living room with the half full beer bottle beside him to wait for the police.

They came, and Shayne told his story to Lieutenant Edwards, and then he left them going over the house with everything in their technical repertoire. He did not think they would find much.

His mind was working on Manny Dingan and his loving wife. He did not see any conspiracy yet, but you never could tell with someone like Dingan. But he had one big loose end to fill in—Doctor K. Bokar.

When he strode into the medical center this time, the receptionist informed him that Dr. Bokar was in his office. He went up and along the hall to the austere door of Dr. K. Bokar, M.D. He went in, and

found himself in a Spartan waiting room all alone.

A nurse materialized. "Yes, sir? Do you have an appointment?"

"No, and I'm not a patient. My name is Mike Shayne, I'm a private detective and I have to talk to Dr. Bokar."

"A detective?" the nurse said, and Shayne saw a thick wariness come over her. "I'm afraid the doctor doesn't talk to detectives."

"Would he rather talk to the police? This is probably a murder case."

She didn't bat an eye. "Mr. Shayne, Doctor Bokar knows the police. He is not required to speak to them about any patient, either."

"Not even if the patient is a known criminal, gangster and maybe killer?" Shayne said bluntly.

This didn't ruffle a hair. "No, Mr. Shayne, not even then." She seemed to study Shayne. "I have the feeling that you don't know what kind of doctor Dr. Bokar is. Am I right?"

"A hundred percent," Shayne said. "Does it matter?"

"Oh, yes, it matters a great deal."

"Okay, what kind of doctor is good Dr. Bokar?"

"A psychiatrist, Mr. Shayne. So you see, his clients may be almost any kind of person, and what they tell Dr. Bokar is strictly confidential."



TIM ROURKE

Shayne blinked. "A psychiatrist?"

Manny Dingan a patient of a head doctor? A chill ran up and down Shayne's spine. He thought of the blue sedan, and the other people tailing Dingan and now himself. If the gang ever knew that Manny Dingan, who knew enough to send a hundred hard men away forever, was talking to a psychiatrist—

"All the more reason I have to talk to the doctor," Shayne said. "Look, this could mean not just one murder, but a whole massacre. I've got to see the doctor!"

She shook her head. "That won't be possible."

A voice seemed to come from nowhere. "Never mind, Miss Minus, I'll talk to Mr. Shayne. Send him into room four."

Shayne spotted the intercom on

the nurse's desk. Apparently Dr. K. Bokar kept his reception room bugged at all times to hear what was going on. The nurse still showed no reaction of any kind. She simply turned now, and led Shayne with a nod of her head.

"This way, Mr. Shayne."

She was a trained psychiatric nurse; nothing surprised her, and she did her job with silent efficiency. Now she ushered Mike Shayne into a small, comfortable room with a desk, an armchair, and a long, leather couch with a headrest.

Shayne waited. He did not have to wait long. A slender man in a business suit came through a second door, held out his hand.

"Mr. Shayne, I'm Kevin Bokar."

Bokar had a firm, manly, reassuring grip—but not too firm, and not too manly, which might have been intimidating. The psychiatrist waved Shayne to the armchair, and sat himself behind the desk. He picked up a pencil, balanced it.

"Now, just what is it I can do for you?" Bokar said.

"You heard what I told your nurse."

Bokar smiled. "True. What is the name of the man you are interested in?"

"Manny Dingan."

"And how do you know Mr. Dingan is a patient of mine?"

"I tailed him here. He was in your office exactly an hour, give

and take ten minutes waiting and up and down."

"I see. Well, let's say Mr. Dingan is a patient. Then what?"

"Do you know who he is, Doc?"

"No comment, Mr. Shayne."

"If you do, you must know you're in real hot water yourself if you listen to what he tells you. If you don't know who he is, I'm warning you that he has friends who would swat you like a fly if they thought Dingan was whispering anything."

"No comment. I'm sorry," Bokar said.

Shayne leaned. "Listen, Doc, I know what happens in one of your sessions. If Manny Dingan is using you to clear a bad conscience, you better be very careful. You probably know enough to get you killed fast right now."

Bokar toyed with the pencil. "Mr. Shayne, I'm a doctor of the mind. In a way everything I hear could be dangerous to me. I believe that even Mr. Dingan's associates know that what I hear is totally confidential."

"Don't bet on it," Shayne said bluntly. "Maybe they know, but they're the kind of men who kill for insurance, to be sure. And if they get any hint that—"

"What kind of hint could they get about Mr. Dingan's revelations? My files are totally secret."

"Just a hint that Dingan is coming here might be enough."

Bokar toyed with the pencil. His

thin face was serious and frowning. He smoothed his light brown hair, and turned to look out the window, only the window wasn't there; it was covered with heavy curtains. Bokar stared at the curtains for a time. Then he sighed.

"I'll just have to face the risk, Mr. Shayne."

"Can you face the risk of what might happen to other people?"

"Other people?"

"Dingan is up to something, in some kind of clandestine activity. If I knew what his private troubles were, maybe I could do something to stop what's going to happen."

"I'm sorry," Bokar said. "Anything said to me here is completely secret."

"No matter what?"

"No matter anything, Mr. Shayne."

Shayne got up and began to pace the small room. His gray eyes were hard, like flint on a cold day, and his gaunt jaw was set in a grim line.

"Listen, Doctor," Shayne said as he paced, "I don't want to violate your confidence. Don't tell me anything about Manny Dingan that could incriminate him in anything. Just tell me why a man like that came to you, what his trouble was."

"No, Mr. Shayne."

"Look, it's a matter of life and death. It might involve a lot of innocent people. Can't you at least tell me if Dingan is planning some action that will cause havoc?"

Bokar bit his lip and pressed the

pencil so hard against the top of his desk that the point snapped with a sharp sound. Bokar looked at the broken point.

"I'll tell you this much, Mr. Shayne. While Dingan told me enough for me to know who and what he is, it is not what he is, his career in crime, that is bothering him to the point of coming to me. His problem, neurotic conflict if you will, is purely private. Now that's absolutely all I can tell you."

Shayne nodded. "All right, Doc, I'll accept that. But one more thing—does Dingan have an appointment for today?"

"Yes, but he has not shown up. He was to have been here now, at this hour. I have the time I am giving you because Dingan has not kept his appointment today."

"He cancelled?"

"No, he simply has not appeared."

Shayne rubbed at his ear. "That's unusual in your work, isn't it?"

"Very unusual for Dingan. Not unusual for many other of my patients."

"Thanks, Doc, I appreciate your help."

"I wish I could do more."

Shayne walked out through the deserted reception room, and took the elevator down. In his car again, he pondered his next move. There was only one. He drove out to Manny Dingan's big house. On the way he stopped to call. Mrs. Dingan

was at home now, Manny wasn't. That was the way Shayne wanted it.

VII

MRS. DINGAN met Mike Shayne at the door. The racketeer's wife was pale and worried.

"Where could he be, Mr. Shayne?"

"I don't know," Shayne said, "but I know where he should be and isn't."

"Where is that?"

"At the office of Doctor Bokar."

"Have you found out what he's been going to a doctor for?" she asked with a catch in her voice.

Her hand went up to her throat the way most people's hands do when they fear a statement of death.

"Not exactly, but I found out what kind of doctor Bokar is," Shayne said. "He's a psychiatrist, Mrs. Dingan, a head doctor."

"A psychiatrist?" she said, startled. "Whatever would Emmanuel want with a psychiatrist? I never knew a man with fewer signs of mental disturbance."

"Now you know that signs don't mean much," Shayne said. "I don't know what he wanted with a psychiatrist. I was hoping you could help me on that."

She shook her head. "But I can't! I haven't the faintest idea what could be bothering Emmanuel that way."

"You're sure?" Shayne asked.

"I'm sure." She stared at Shayne. "I knew that there was something very wrong. Something private, personal."

"Maybe not so private," Shayne said. "Maybe it's just a guilty conscience about all the men he's had killed, all the arms he's twisted, all the people he's ruined."

She didn't flinch. "No, Mr. Shayne, Emmanuel quieted any conscience he might have had about his work long ago. You know the story: a man has to make his way, and a strong man does what he can to live well. It's not his fault society forced him outside the law, and he never hurt anyone who wasn't trying to hurt him."

"Something's bothering him enough to risk going to a head doctor when he knows what his 'friends' would think about it," Shayne said. "Maybe his conscience didn't stay quiet."

She had nothing to say to that. Shayne looked around the big house. She watched him, said:

"We're alone, if you're worried. Emmanuel never let any of his thugs come here."

"I'm looking for where he worked," Shayne said. "Did he keep an office in the house?"

"Yes, in the library. It's not locked."

She led him to the library door, and stood watching as he went inside. It was a rich, comfortable library with many books on wall

shelves—most of them obviously well read. The furniture was modern but comfortable and relaxed. A large desk occupied the far corner near the windows.

In the bright afternoon sunlight, Shayne searched through Manny Dingan's desk. It was an odd sensation, searching in broad sunlight in the desk of a dangerous gangster. It was also fruitless. He found nothing at all in the desk to indicate anything Dingan might be involved in. Dingan did not do any gang business at home.

"Is there anywhere else he might keep papers?" Shayne asked.

"The safe, but I know there's nothing in there," Mrs. Dingan said, "and his bedroom."

"Let's look."

It was in the bedroom that Shayne found the small scrap of paper. It was in the drawer of a small desk. A page torn from a small notebook, with two words on it: Seminole Landing.

"Does this mean anything to you, Mrs. Dingan?"

She looked at the name of the town. "No, nothing at all. It sounds like a place."

"It is," Shayne said. He added to himself that it was a very special place where an escaped convict might be sure to go for help.

"You know where it is?" Mrs. Dingan said. "It's something you've learned about?"

"I've run across it," Shayne said.

"Tell me!"

Shayne shook his head. "No. I'll do this my own way. The name of the town may mean something and it may mean nothing. I want to know more before I start talking about it."

"I'm paying you! Tell me!"

"You're paying me to find out what you wanted to know. I don't know yet. If you want me to stop trying to find out, tell me and I'll go away."

She glared at him, her fine chest heaving and anger mixed with frustrated worry on her face, and then she nodded. Her rigid shoulders relaxed, sagged.

"All right, Mr. Shayne. I suppose you must do it your own way. Just tell me if you think, now, that Emmanuel is in some kind of serious difficulty?"

"I don't know that," Shayne said, "but I'll say that he could be. I'll be in touch."

He left her staring at nothing, a faint trembling in her hands. She loved Manny Dingan, and to love Manny Dingan was to live with the knowledge of disaster all your life.

But he was now thinking of something else: Seminole Landing. Joe Fitch, out of prison, and Manny Dingan, both interested in Seminole Landing. It could involve Dingan all the way. Or it could be simply that Dingan jotted down the name of the town while talking with Anne Fitch.

Shayne was brought abruptly out

of his reverie by the flash of a windshield somewhere down near the gate of the mansion—a windshield where there appeared to be no road. His shadowers were back.

He got into his car and drove down the driveway and out on to the highway. The blue sedan materialized from the trees behind him. Shayne led it a fast chase in a circle along the roads at the edge of the city; shifting direction often, until he was sure he had aroused his shadower's interest.

Then, at a sharp curve, he pulled off the road near a house set deep in trees. He opened the right hand door, and slid down in the driver's seat out of sight with his window open. He took out his automatic and slipped off the safety.

He waited.

He heard the blue sedan hit its brakes hard when it saw his car apparently abandoned at the side of the road with the right door open. He heard the blue sedan sit there with its motor running for some minutes. Then a car door opened and closed.

Soft, light footsteps crunched in the dirt and gravel at the side of the road. Then silence again. The shadower was wary, trying to figure it out. Shayne grinned. The tail would not be able to resist his curiosity.

With the car door open, the silent house in the distance, and the car apparently abandoned, the shadower would just have to take a

look. Shayne was as sure as he was of wind in September.

The footsteps moved again, came closer. Then Shayne saw the shadow of a man fall across the open window above him. Another long pause as the man looked around.

Two careful steps, and a rough, battered face looked in at the car window—straight into the muzzle of Shayne's .45.

Shayne smiled. "Hold it right there."

The face turned to stone. The brown eyes blinked. The head moved a hair.

"No! Not an inch. Hands on the window sill. Now!"

The face stared. A gulp in the thick throat. Then two empty hands rested on the window. Shayne sat up, his .45 an inch from the man's nose. Shayne grinned.

"Very wise, my friend. Now, step back two paces and freeze like a good boy."

The man stepped back and froze. Shayne eased out of the car. The man was short and broad like a fireplug. Short, thick arms that could not hang quite straight and ended in heavy hands matted with black hair.

"Okay, now tell me all about it," Shayne said.

"Nuts," the fireplug said.

"Friend, I don't like being tailed. Now you're going to tell who, what, why, or I'm going to carve your face uglier than it is. Okay?"

"Nuts," the fireplug repeated.

Shayne considered. "I can take you, chum. But that wouldn't bother you, would it? I expect you've been knocked around by experts without getting even a headache."

The fireplug now grinned. "You believe it, pal."

"Fine. How about I shoot you in the kneecap? Maybe both knees? That ought to cripple you for life. Now, I'll bet you don't go for that idea, do you?"

The fireplug went dead white. His brown eyes showed terror. He licked his thick lips.

"You—"

"I would, pal," Shayne said. "Let's try it this way. All you have to do is tell me who sent you, and then take me to him. Nothing more, okay?"

The fireplug blinked, and then a cunning fire came into his eyes. "Take you? You want me to take you to Canio?"

Shayne nodded. "Lou Canio, I should have guessed. Okay, take me—only I'll sort of take you, right?"

The fireplug nodded—too eagerly.

Taking Mike Shayne into the lair of Lou Canio sounded very good to the fireplug. The muscle boy figured he'd be among friends.

Shayne wasn't so sure Canio would feel friendly toward the fireplug when Shayne walked in.

"Let's go," he said.



VIII

THE FIREPLUG led Mike Shayne in through the front door of the most gaudy fake-Spanish mansion the redhead had ever seen. Smooth, silent, tough looking men appeared from the shadows like an honor guard.

When they saw the gun in Mike Shayne's hand and fireplug's back, they stood back, but their cold eyes glittered with the message that Shayne was getting in but maybe it wasn't going to be easy to get out.

By the time Shayne had passed through the corridors of the house that looked like the hallways of a Moorish city hall and reached the glare of sun beside a mammoth swimming pool, he had picked up an army of ten silent men all treading lightly behind.

Lou Canio, and the usual blonde-perfection in a green bikini, lounged beside the pool. Canio

wore less than the blonde. The gang boss was proud of both his figure and his relative youth. He was not pleased by the gun in Mike Shayne's hand.

"Put it up, Shayne. You need a gun to talk to Lou Canio?"

"No," Shayne said, "but I needed a gun to convince your hound dog here. Wave the army away. I'll put it up, Lou."

Canio waved. The army of cold eyes vanished like DeMille extras. Only fireplug still stood there. Lou Canio was the boss, the big boss, who gave orders even to Manny Dingan.

Shayne put up his gun. "Sorry, Lou. I don't like being tailed, especially by a punk like this one."

Fireplug growled. Canio gave him two eyes of pure ice. "Out, stupid."

Fireplug went out. Canio's eyes thawed only about a degree as he turned his attention to Shayne.

"Okay, Shayne, you're here."

"Why the tail, Lou?"

Canio shrugged. "Knowledge is power, Shayne."

"You've been reading books again. You've been tailing Manny Dingan. Manny wouldn't like that."

"No," Canio said, "Manny wouldn't like it. It hurts me to do what Manny wouldn't like, only I got to do it."

"Why?"

Canio seemed to watch the ripples on his mammoth pool. "You

spotted my tails, right? Manny, he ain't spotted them yet. Now, how come a peeper spots and Manny Dingan don't spot? I mean, Manny he's no punk; he's been around a lot of years."

"He's got something on his mind."

"Yeah, that's what I think. He got something so big on his mind he's in a fog. I got to know what, right? I mean, Dingan that busy inside his head got to be trouble for Lou Canio, right?"

"How long have you been worried, Lou?"

"A month, maybe six weeks."

"And you don't know yet what Dingan's up to?"

"No."

"Tell me another story, Lou."

Canio sat up. "Listen, Shayne, you think I'd still have a tail on Manny, and on you; if I knew? My boys been covering all angles; that's why they picked you up. I don't know what Dingan's up to, nothing I can find out from—"

Canio stopped. Shayne had heard the honest worry. The big boss of Miami rackets was worried, really worried.

Which meant that Manny Dingan was not acting in any way, or for any reason, that was normal for a gangster.

"You haven't spotted the Doc?"

"Doc? What Doc?" Canio said innocently.

Shayne nodded. "I get it. You've spotted the Doc, and you don't like

it, but you can't find out why Dingan's seeing the Doc, and Manny's just a little too big for you to move against him without knowing exactly what he's up to."

"You're telling it," Canio said, but his dark eyes told Shayne that his guess was the truth.

"And you spotted the girl, too?"

"Girl?"

"Mrs. Anne Fitch. Did Joe Fitch work for you and Manny?"

"I never heard of no Fitch. Any kind of Fitch."

"Tell me another, Lou. Your boys wouldn't have missed the girl."

"So they spotted a girl and Manny. Big deal."

"Which one of them killed her?"

Canio reached over and patted the rump of the blonde. She got up and trotted away without a word. When she was gone, Canio found a cigar in a silver box on the patio table beside him, lit it slowly and carefully, and blew on the match.

"Kill is a word nobody uses around here unless he got a warrant and six Feds to back him up," Canio said. "Only for you, I'll give you the word. You think any of my boys killed this Fitch woman, prove it. You think I did it personally, forget it."

"Alibi?"

"You know it. One of my boys found her maybe eight A.M. today. That's all, just found. Now I was on a drunk last two days, it happens."

"I don't like to be seen like that, so I go to a private rest cure. I was there all last night, locked in a room. The Hanson Clinic. You check."

"I will," Shayne said, "and on your boys."

"Swell. Now you can walk out. Keep your paws off your gun, and you'll get out safe."

Shayne got out safe.

But not without a long walk down those Morrish corridors with the smooth, silent men watching him all the way. To say nothing of the hidden men with their guns ready.

As he emerged again into the sun, Shayne was aware of the simple fact that he could not have got out if Canio had not wanted him to—and he could not have got in, gun or no gun, hostage or no hostage, unless Canio had wanted him to.

So the boss racketeer had wanted to talk to him. To tell his story and to deny any complicity in the death of Anne Fitch. Or maybe just to throw more suspicion on the secret activities of Manny Dingan. The gangsters were not above using the law to do their work these days if they could manage it.

Shayne looked at his watch as he drove away from Canio's Spanish castle, and saw that he was hungry. It was long past his lunch time. And he needed food under his belt for the long drive he was about to make.

IX

SEMINOLE LANDING was a sleepy inland town on a sluggish Florida river complete with alligators sunning in the vicious heat. The wide main street seemed to hang in dust, with dispirited cars nosed in in the center of the street, and men in broad-brimmed hats, galluses and boots lounging in any shade they could find and watching Mike Shayne drive by.

There was no sign of excitement, but then, these back-country people would not be especially excited by a boy breaking jail. They would not be excited by much of anything, and would tend to help one of their own against any outsider, even the law. The police station was drab and asleep, without a sign of action and the shades drawn against the heat.

Shayne did not stop at the police station. That he could do later if necessary. He stopped instead at a diner on the far outskirts of the shimmering town and asked where the street was where Angela Fitch lived, as from the envelope in Anne Fitch's house.

It was an unpaved street at the north edge of town. The houses were small, and dusty but they were well-kept and neat, and in this town even a palace would have been dusty. It was not a poor street; it was simply not rich. An average street.

The house where Mrs. Angela

Fitch lived was smaller even than the other small houses, but it was clean and neat and set farther back from the dusty road. In front it had a profuse and well tended flower garden. In a way it stood out on the street as the home of someone who still had pride. The rest of the houses had an aura of slow but steady defeat.

Shayne parked in the dust and opened the gate in the white fence that surrounded the Fitch cottage. He went up the walk with a sense of being watched—not from inside the house of Mrs. Angela Fitch, but from the houses of the neighbors. He rang the bell.

The door opened to reveal a small, slim, toylike woman with a pretty face under gray hair. Her tiny body was well-made, still curvy despite what had to be at least fifty years of age, and her pretty face must have been dazzling once.

"Can I help you?" she said in a melodic voice.

"If you're Mrs. Angela Fitch you can."

"Then come in."

She was open and smiling. She seemed to have no wariness, but Shayne stepped in alert—he had been invited into houses by innocent-seeming women before. There was no one in the small house that he could see. He turned to the woman.

"My name is Shayne, Mike Shayne. I came to talk about your son Joseph."

She nodded. "I guessed that, Mr. Shayne. I have few visits from strangers. Those that do come always want Joseph."

"Have there been others?" the redhead said.

"Not recently, if that's what you mean. Joseph moved to Miami some time ago. He was married there."

"I'm aware of that, Mrs. Fitch."

She opened a round china jar and took out a cigarette, offering one to Shayne. He lit both cigarettes. She sat back on the neat couch and studied him.

"Are you a policeman, Mr. Shayne?"

"No, not really. I'm a private detective."

"Private? You mean you've been hired to investigate my son? Why? I assume you know that Joseph is in prison?"

"I know he's in jail, but I wasn't hired to investigate him," Shayne explained. "I was hired to investigate the actions of a man named Manny Dingan. That investigation led me to Joe."

"Dingan?" she said, puzzled. "I know no Dingan."

"They must have met in Miami."

"I see, yes," and she stopped and watched Shayne. "From your manner I gather that this Dingan isn't precisely a man you like. Is he a man my son shouldn't know?"

"He's a man no one's son should know. He's a racketeer and gangster, Mrs. Fitch."

"I see. Did he have anything to do with Joseph's trouble?"

"That I don't know," Shayne admitted. "So far I can't find any hint that he did. But he's somehow involved with your son, and he brings trouble with him."

"What kind of trouble, Mr. Shayne?"

The redhead had been studying the once beautiful woman all through their conversation. She was calm, quiet, a totally self-contained woman who seemed to have no problems she could not handle. She seemed to know nothing about Joe Fitch's jailbait.

"Have you seen your son today, Mrs. Fitch," Shayne said sharply.

"Today?" she said, stared. "I've told you that my son is in prison. I go once a month to see him, not—"

"He's not in prison now, Mrs. Fitch," Shayne said bluntly.

For the first time she showed emotion; the smooth facade cracked. She jumped up. "He was released? They let him out, and no one told me?"

"He let himself out," Shayne said. "Last night, late."

"Let—" she subsided on the couch, her face scared now. "He broke out of jail? Escaped? Joseph?"

"He did, and got clean away. Did he come here, Mrs. Fitch? The police will find out sooner or later. If you tell us it'll go easier on everyone."

She didn't seem to hear Shayne. Her violet eyes, scared and yet suddenly soft with tears, were staring at nothing. Her voice was almost broken.

"Joseph a fugitive? Being hunted? Oh, God!"

"Did he come here, Mrs. Fitch?"

But she was still seeing her son running through the night with all the world chasing him, hounding him. She was feeling his terror, his hopeless flight.

"Mrs. Fitch," Shayne said more gently.

She seemed to shudder. "Yes?"

"Did Joe come here?"

"No, Mr. Shayne, he didn't."

"Where would he go? Who were his friends here?"

She shook her head. "He had few friends. Joe was a wild boy, Mr. Shayne, yet quiet, withdrawn. He—he brooded a great deal. He couldn't stand it here; it was too slow and dusty. He has no one here but me."

"Can you think of anywhere he would go?"

"To his wife, I suppose. Anne is a nice young thing in a childish way."

"She was," Shayne said bluntly, watching the tiny woman.

Her violet eyes grew wide. "Was? You said, was? You mean that Anne is dead?"

"Murdered."

"Oh, no! No!"

"Do you think Joe did it?"

Tears trickled down her face.

"He could have. Was she doing anything? I mean, with men? Joe was always terribly jealous, terribly devoted. He could never bear to think of anyone touching what was his. But no, I can't believe that Joe would kill her."

"Maybe he didn't. Let's say he didn't. If he didn't come to you and didn't go to Anne, where else might he have gone?"

She thought. "There is one possible place. When Joe was just a little boy his father used to take him up to a lodge in the back country. It's quite rustic, less now than then, but still fairly deserted. Joseph liked the lodge. He seemed to feel he belonged up there."

"Where is it?"

"I'll write out the directions. It's in a place called Jones's Wash."

She went out of the room. Shayne stepped to the doorway and listened to her. She seemed to be rummaging in a desk. He heard nothing suspicious. When she returned he was in his chair.

She looked at Shayne. "Should I help you, Mr. Shayne? Will you hurt Joseph?"

"He's in danger as long as he's loose, Mrs. Fitch."

"Yes, I know that. He must go back, but can I be sure that you will send him back? Perhaps—"

"I'll send him back. I'll even say he went voluntarily. No one was hurt in his break. But he has to go back."

She nodded slowly, and sat down



to write out the directions. Shayne waited and watched her. She had been a remarkably beautiful woman some twenty years or so ago, he was certain. She was strong and yet not hard, but there was something sad hanging over her and the small house and it was not just her son.

She gave him the directions. "It's a small cabin, little more than a shack now, and it's not easy to approach without being observed, Mr. Shayne. It's on a small river, but the river is quite deep and difficult to cross. Quicksand, you know. If Joseph is there he might be desperate."

"I'll be careful, Mrs. Fitch, and I promise that if I can't get to him I won't harm him."

"Thank you, but I don't try to lie to myself. Joseph was not sent to prison by mistake. I had hoped

he would learn, but it seems he hasn't. I understand the dangers he has brought on himself. All I can do is pray that he will be captured safe, and returned."

Shayne could think of nothing to say. He nodded and left. Outside the sun was already going down. It would be night before he reached the cabin.

X

THE CABIN STOOD isolated in the night under a low moon. It was on a point of land that fitted into an ox-bow of the small river. The river itself was a slow, sinister black ribbon in the moonlight, and there was open space all the way around the cabin where the river did not protect it.

Mike Shayne moved through the thick brush. His car was a quarter of a mile back up the narrow dirt track that led in from the highway. He had his automatic out because he had seen the signs of a car passing along the road within the last few days.

He crouched as close to the cabin as he could get without leaving the cover of the trees and bushes. A small, pale car was parked close to the cabin all but hidden in the shadows. There was no light in the cabin itself, but the windows were open, a thin white curtain fluttered vaguely in the slow, hot wind.

Shayne studied the land and the problem. With luck it was dark

enough for him to work his way around to the cabin unseen if he went in a circle close to the river. He could see no other way unless Fitch were asleep—if it were Fitch in the cabin. And if so he doubted that the fugitive would be asleep.

Shayne began the approach. It was slow work. If he had not wanted to be sure to take Fitch alive he might have tried a bolder approach—he was outside in the dark, and no one could escape from the cabin without him seeing him. But he didn't want a gun battle if he could avoid it.

So he moved slowly and carefully through the dark trees and brush toward the black water of the river. When he reached the bank he found a narrow, low shelf which would give him cover to a point some twenty feet from the rear corner of the cabin.

When he got to the spot he raised up cautiously. There was still no sign of movement inside the cabin. He had the twenty feet to cross in the full open, and then the shelter of the cabin itself. There was no way around it, the twenty feet had to be crossed.

He ran for the cabin.

He fought down the urge to hurl himself down the instant he reached the corner of the cabin. He slowed and eased into a crouch at the corner. He listened.

There was still no sound in the cabin, and no sign of any movement. Shayne waited until his

breathing was back to normal, took a good grip on his automatic, and began to move softly along the wall toward the first open window.

He reached the window and looked in. At first he could see nothing in the dark interior of the cabin. Then he saw open cans of food, and a coffee pot on a table. A box of groceries stood on the floor near the table. A rifle leaned against the table.

His eyes grew more accustomed to the dark interior, and he let them glance over the whole room. There seemed to be only the one room, and yet he didn't see a bed or any signs of the person who had eaten the meal. Was it a trap?

He glanced around the night outside, carefully, alert. He saw and heard nothing at all. The moon, higher now, shone down on a deserted clearing and the silent black river. The car? No, it was patently empty. And what would a fugitive, on the run all night and a day, need most? Sleep.

He looked back into the room. This time he saw it—a dim curtain hanging down on the far side of the room. A hundred-to-one that there was a bed behind the curtain, a sort of sleeping alcove. All right. Someone was sleeping in there, too tired to keep watch any longer, half confident that no one would think of this place.

Shayne looked around in the dirt. He found a small stone, and two more. He picked them up. His

automatic ready, he tossed the first stone into the room. It hit with a faint clatter, rolled.

Shayne waited.

Behind the curtain he heard the faintest of movements.

There was a heavy silence with a sense of someone rigid and listening.

Shayne dropped the second stone just inside the window.

A bed creaked. A whiff of movement fluttered the curtains over the alcove.

Shayne waited with his automatic trained on the curtains.

After another long minute, with no movement behind the curtains, Shayne tossed the last stone. He threw it to hit the coffee pot. The sound was exactly like someone striking the pot by accident while standing near the table.

The curtains parted suddenly and the shadowy figure of a small, slender man stepped through fast. The man held a gun. He wore only pants and a shirt, without shoes, and the gun was aimed straight at the table and the coffee pot. That put him sideways to Shayne at the window.

"Drop the gun and don't even breathe!" Shayne said.

In a half crouch the slender man seemed to be a statue caught in a beam of light. The gun hand trembled with a movement about to begin.

Mike Shayne carefully cocked his hammer back.

"Don't try it, Fitch. I don't want to hurt you."

Still the small figure did not move a muscle.

"I've got you cold, so just drop it. You haven't hurt anyone so far, and three years isn't worth a slab in the morgue."

For another ten long seconds the slender man stood there. Then the gun dropped, and the man turned to face Shayne.

"Who are you?"

"No one you know. Just a citizen who doesn't want to see you make any more of a fool of yourself. Breaking out of a three-year rap for a first offense is crazy, boy. Good conduct, and you'd have been out in eighteen months."

"Who asked you, mister?" The voice was hard, bitter.

"You are Joe Fitch?"

"No, I'm Pretty-Boy Floyd, wise guy."

"Sure," Shayne said, "and keep this up you'll end up just like Floyd. Now let's have some light, and move careful."

"Why should I? You ain't goin' to shoot, mister."

"Don't bet on it, son," Shayne said quietly. "I'm a good shot. I can bring you down like a bird on its belly, only I can't guarantee I won't cripple you."

"Nuts, Jack!"

"This is a forty-five, boy. It does more damage than you can think."

The boy seemed to shiver, and then started toward the table and

an electric lantern that stood near the coffee pot.

"Aim it the other way, son," Shayne said, "before you turn it on."

Fitch reached for the lamp and turned it away from Shayne. He reached down for the switch.

The shots shattered the night, and two heavy blows shook the cabin walls above Shayne's head.

The redhead dove for the ground.

Another brace of shots hammered the night, and dirt kicked up a few feet from Shayne's head.

The redhead rolled for the cover of the small car. He reached the car, breathed heavily, and raised up slowly. He heard the door of the cabin crash open, and Fitch suddenly appeared running across the open space toward the woods.

Shayne raised his automatic and fired a shot across the fleeing boy's bow. Fitch flung himself flat.

Two more shots tore the night from the dark bushes to Shayne's left and some fifty yards away across the clearing. Shayne went down again. The bullets clanged the metal of the car, whined off into the night.

Shayne lay flat, peered around the front wheel, and squeezed off two fast shots in the direction of his unseen attacker. There were no answering shots. The redhead waited. He fired again. Still no answer. He turned to look at where Fitch had gone down.

The clearing was empty now.

Swearing, Shayne stood up. No one shot at him. He listened. In the still night he heard the sound of crashing through the bushes. Gun in hand, he took off on the run along the dirt road.

He was a running duck, but there were some chances a man had to take.

XI

HALFWAY ALONG the dirt road to his car, Mike Shayne heard the sound of a car door slamming shut. It carried clear in the quiet night. He ran faster.

Shayne had almost reached where he had left his car when he heard the roar of a car starting up. He reached his car and hurled himself inside. The motor of the other car sounded not a hundred yards ahead. Shayne waited with his hand on the ignition key.

The car ahead pulled away and headlights swept the night. Shayne started up. He pulled on to the dirt road and gunned toward the car ahead. Just as he heard the sounds that said the car was reaching the highway, the beams of other headlights suddenly cut the night and four quick shots exploded like shock waves in his ears.

There was a sharp scream of tires, and a motor gunning away. The new car squealed into action. Shayne came in sight of the highway just in time to see the new car

pull from the bushes at the edge of the highway and take off after the first car.

A blue sedan.

Shayne screeched onto the highway and joined the wild chase.

The three cars roared along the deserted inland highway. Far ahead Shayne could see the tail-lights of the first car with his attacker in it, and presumably with Joe Fitch also in it. Closer, the fiery red eyes of the blue sedan glared back at him in the night.

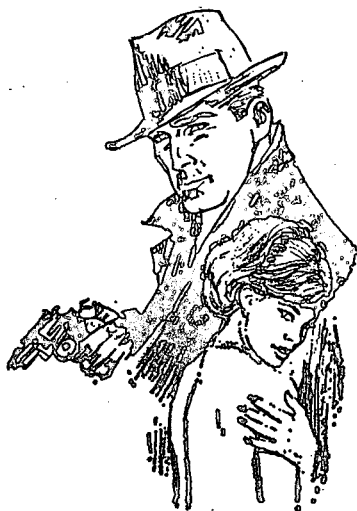
Shayne held his distance from the blue sedan but the leading car did not. The blue sedan, and Shayne behind it, closed inexorably on the lead car. The blue sedan was obviously souped-up, and even Shayne began to lose ground.

A sharp curve appeared far ahead, and the lead car had to slow to make it. The blue sedan did slow, took a chance, and roared around the curve without slackening.

Shayne gritted his teeth, gripped the wheel, and tried to match the blue sedan.

He hurled out of the long, sharp curve with the blue sedan still ahead and the lead car much closer. The blue sedan now gained even faster. Shayne fell behind. Another curve loomed ahead.

Shayne watched the lead car, slowing again, and the blue sedan, going full tilt, vanish around the curve. He clamped on the steering wheel once more and went around



As he came out he saw an instant of almost frozen drama.

The lead car was off the side of the road, stopped where a side road came into the highway.

The blue sedan was still roaring at something over eighty, maybe over ninety.

In that instant the two cars were almost on top of each other, with the blue sedan still racing ahead. Two shots, slow and spaced, split the night like measured hammer blows.

Shayne fought to slow his own car as he pulled close to the parked car and saw a dark shape down on one knee with both hands extended. A flash of flame came from the kneeling figure.

The left front tire of the blue sedan seemed to spit a puff of

smoke and dust. A muffled explosion.

The front tire of the blue sedan blew apart.

The blue sedan careened wildly for a second; then, like the inexorable action of slow motion, it turned up on its nose, left the road, flipped in the air, sailed some fifty feet, and smashed down into the heavy brush.

It rolled over end-over-end through thick trees, snapping them off, shedding fenders, wheels, trunk lid, roof, engine cover in a shower of flying debris with everything turning lazily in the night. Finally flames burst high and the blue sedan shuddered blazing against a tall tree a hundred yards off the highway.

Shayne was on top of the lead car now, and saw in the flame-light, the shapes of two men climbing back into the car. A shot sang past him. He could not stop or he would share the fate of the blue sedan. He roared past and then slowly brought his car down to a halt.

He turned, and drove back. The lead car was already pulling back on to the highway and heading back in the opposite direction. Shayne slowed where the blue sedan still burned. There were high, horrible screams. Shayne stopped and ran toward the shattered and burning wreck.

The screams rose higher and began to fade. Shayne reached the

wreck. What had been a man hung headless from a tree branch.

Inside what had been the blue sedan a man sat with his hair burning and his face a blackened cinder. The man neither moved nor screamed any longer.

Shayne turned, sick, and saw the third man lying crushed against a thick tree, his body bent around it. It was the man he had captured—Canio's fireplug. Shayne did not even go to look. No man could be alive in that position.

Shayne ran for the road, trying to remember that the three had been killers.

He jumped back into his car and gunned off after the lead car with Joe Fitch and his unknown helper in it. He had to force himself to drive fast; the sight of the remains of the blue sedan burned into his brain to make him afraid.

He drove until the back-country highway crossed the main north-south highway into distant Miami. He stopped, lighted a cigarette, and thought. They could have gone anywhere, but he had a hunch they were on their way to Miami.

He played his hunch, and turned on to the southbound highway. He reached Miami just after one. He drove straight to the small cottage where Joe Fitch had lived with his murdered wife.

The cottage was dark, without a car around it, and no signs of anyone even the police. Shayne parked and approached the dark house

with caution. In the driveway he bent down.

There were what looked like fresh tire marks with the tread outlined in dried red clay. There had been red clay at the cabin on the river.

Shayne drew his automatic again.

He stepped quietly to the house. There was a police seal on the front door. He listened, and heard nothing. The seal was not broken. There was red clay on the porch. Shayne went around the house.

The back door, too, was sealed. The seal was not broken, and there was traces of mud.

Shayne tugged on his earlobe and walked around examining the windows. He found a bedroom window unlocked. It had been jimmied. He climbed in and looked around. There was no sound and no sign of anyone, but someone had been here. Fitch? And his unknown helper? Probably, and then maybe not.

With Canio's men up there at the cabin, maybe Canio had been there, too. The boss gangster had been pretty sure that none of his boys had killed Anne Fitch, or sure that Shayne could not find it out, which was the same thing. Only for himself had he provided an alibi.

Shayne went through the house but found nothing, except a picture of Joseph Fitch he had not seen before. The picture had been glassed and framed and someone had

smashed it. As if someone had hit it hard with a fist.

Shayne looked at the picture thoughtfully, then left by the same window. He returned to his car. It was late, but he did not think that The Hanson Clinic was likely to be closed. It had all the sound of one of the barred-window set-ups, places for rich drunks, and maybe worse, to sober up in privacy.

For a price, that is.

XII

WHICH IS JUST what The Hanson Clinic looked like when Mike Shayne drove up. The gate, big and heavy, was locked and guarded. The guard ambled out of a fortress gatehouse.

"Yeah?"

Shayne feigned his best drunk-trying-to-not-shake routine. His lips twitched, his eyes were slits, and his hands shook on the wheel.

"Lemme in, buddy," he said thickly.

"Got an appointment, chum?"

"Friend," Shayne said shakily. "A friend sent me. I got to dry out."

"Beat it," the guard said.

"Listen," Shayne said in feigned desperation. "This friend, he said he'd call the top Doc, fix it. He's got pull here."

The guard studied him. "Doc Hanson himself? Who's the friend, pal?"

"Lou Canio."

The guard almost stepped back

in shock. His eyes glazed, and then spotted the bulge Shayne carefully let him see where the automatic hid in its holster.

"Mr. Canio sent you?"

"Look, I got to get help," Shayne croaked.

The guard hesitated. Shayne made a vague gesture at his gun. The guard stepped to the gate. "Okay, go on up. I'll call the Doc."

Shayne drove through the unlocked gate, and up a long driveway toward an imposing modern structure of red brick and white trim. It looked like some elegant country club, except for all the barred windows on the top two floors. There were lights on in many windows.

Shayne parked and did a stiff walk, fast, up the steps and into the silent lobby. An elegant and comfortable lobby that looked like a restrained cocktail lounge. He braced for the advance of hordes in white suits, but no one came near him.

There was no one in sight. Shayne looked around in wary surprise. The guard at the gate had certainly alerted Doc Hanson. Yet no one seemed interested in Shayne. At least a friend of Lou Canio's should have rated some attention.

Shayne was still pondering it all when two burly types in the white suits dashed from a cross corridor, through the lobby, and into another corridor. They looked at Shayne

but didn't even slow down. Shayne sensed the unusual.

He walked along the corridor the two burly types had come from. He heard voices ahead. They sounded excited. He located the source in an office marked: *Dr. James Hanson, D.L.S.*—whatever D.L.S. stood for.

He opened the door and stepped in. Four people in the room didn't even look at him. Two were dressed like nurses, and looked like shoplifters. The other two were men; older men with gray hair and the faces of con men. One of the men finally looked at him.

"Who are you?"

"Didn't you get the call? I'm Lou Canio's friend."

The harried man nodded. "Yes, yes, we got the call. You'll have to wait. Dr. Hanson is hurt."

Only then did Mike Shayne see the fat little creature spread out on a couch, almost completely hidden by the hovering nurses and gray-haired men. Dr. Hanson looked in need of help. He was battered like a rotten tomato, and just as pulpy in the face.

As Shayne watched, Hanson, if that was who he was, opened one swollen eye, and looked hazily around the office.

"Canio? Is Canio here?" he asked.

"Take it easy, Dr. Hanson," one of the shop-lifter nurses said.

The fat little man pushed at the air. "No, shut up! Canio?"



"It's a friend of Mr. Canio's," one of the gray-haired men said.

"Friend?" Hanson muttered thickly through the raw meat of his lips. "Where is he? Get him here."

They pushed Mike Shayne to the couch. Hanson looked up, but it was clear that the fat man could see very little. Apparently Shayne looked evil enough to be a friend of Lou Canio's, and Hanson's battered brain was not thinking too clearly. All the fat quack had in mind was his message. He beckoned Shayne to lean down close.

The mashed lips tickled at Shayne's ear. "Tell Canio . . . they beat it out of me . . . don't know who . . . kid and stocky man, maybe fifty. I couldn't hold out . . . they know Lou went out that night . . . no cops."

Hanson fell back breathing heavily with his eyes closed. He had delivered his warning to Lou Canio's friend. Everyone else in the room clucked over the battered leader of the joint.

Shayne eased his way out. Their panic would ebb soon, and then they might start to wonder just what had happened to Lou Canio's friend's urgent need for medical help.

He hurried, without hurrying, along the hall back to the lobby. It was still empty. The attack on their leader had unnerved the troops. Shayne made it to his car without trouble. The gate might not be so easy.

He stopped the car short of the gate and eased his way up to the fortress gate-house. The guard was slumped half asleep at a desk, his gun on the table in front of him. The bunch of keys hung loosely from his belt.

Shayne slid inside as silently as he could. He almost made it. He was less than three steps from the guard when the man came alive and moved for the gun. Shayne jumped and chopped a short right to the jaw. The guard went to sleep all the way.

Shayne grabbed the keys and unlocked the gate. He wedged it open, and ran back for his car. He gunned the car down and through the gate just as the guard appeared in the gatehouse door.

Shayne made the turn into the highway on two wheels to the accompaniment of two bullets, both as wild as his turn. The guard had no right or reason to shoot, but the guard was not thinking straight just now. Guards don't like to be hit

while dozing. It hurts their self-image.

Shayne vanished into the night, and forgot the guard. He was thinking about Manny Dingan. The description of Dr. Hanson had sounded very like Dingan. Which meant that the racketeer was involved with Joe Fitch, and was probably the unseen shooter who had stopped Shayne at the cabin, and finished off Canio's men.

If there was a connection between Dingan and the Fitch boy, there was only one place to find out.

XIII

SHAYNE REACHED Seminole Landing just after dawn. A hot, heavy dawn with a rancid sun lumbering up almost with the first light. Heat lay on the streets, holding even the dust down for a time.

Shayne parked in front of the small house set back from the street behind its flower gardens, and for the first time realized he should have wondered about Joe Fitch coming from a neat and cared-for home like this. It spoke of some worm gnawing somewhere deep inside the quiet house and the beautiful flowers. A worm that had eaten into Joseph and not his mother.

It took six rings to rouse movement in the quiet house, and by then three shades had lifted in other houses for eyes to stare out

at him. When Mrs. Angela Fitch appeared in the doorway, she wore only a bathrobe and paid no attention to her nosy neighbors.

"Did you find him, Mr. Shayne?"

No protest about the ungodly hour, and no preliminaries. Mrs. Angela Fitch was a strong woman.

"I found him," Shayne said, — "and lost him. Can I come in?"

"Of course."

She stepped back, and Shayne strode into the living room. She followed him, braiding her hair into a long braid behind. Shayne stood. She watched him.

"Coffee?"

"In a minute, maybe. I lost Joe because someone came to his aid. One man. Later some hoodlums belonging to a man named Lou Canio tried to get to Joe, and his unknown helper shot their tires and killed all three of them."

She shuddered. "Did—did Joe kill anyone?"

"Not that I know of. He went to his cottage in Miami, and he probably knows by now that Anne is dead."

"Poor Joseph," she said, and, "then you lost him? He's still a fugitive?"

"But not alone, Mrs. Fitch. He has a helper, and a deadly one. I think I know who that helper is. What I don't know is why he is helping Joe."

"Who is he?"

"Manny Dingan, like I said before."

"But I don't know any Manny Dingan."

Shayne began to pace. "He's a gangster, Mrs. Fitch. He's cold, and sharp and deadly. Only he's been acting strangely in recent months. He's been secretive, taking secret trips, playing up to Anne, going to a psychiatrist on some private troubles. He's been interested in Seminole Landing. Now he's working with Joe. He probably had Joe broken out of jail, it's something he could arrange with a snap of his fingers. The question is—why?"

"I simply don't know, Mr. Shayne. Perhaps if you told me more about him I could place him in Joseph's past."

"I don't know anything more about him than I've told you. He's a gangster, that's it. The details no one knows. He has a wife and a mansion and enemies, but that's all I know. He's in his fifties, smooth, smallish and stocky. He wears his clothes well, and he doesn't talk much. He—"

Shayne stopped. The mother of Joe Fitch was sitting stock still and staring at empty space. She seemed to be in some kind of trance. Suddenly, she stood up and left the room.

Shayne waited where he was, his gaunt face hard and frowning.

He was just about to go after her, when she returned. She held a large photograph. She handed it to Shayne. The redhead looked at it.

It showed a serious, almost grim young man in a neat, reserved suit of a cut about twenty years old. A small, but muscular man who was already stocky and who would grow thicker with age. The face was youthful, but the eyes were the same.

Shayne looked at Angela Fitch. "It looks like him. Maybe twenty years younger, but it could be Manny Dingan."

Angela Fitch took the picture, looked at it, and slowly sat down. She seemed to shrink inside herself.

"His name was Morgan Fitch," she said. "He had a lot of money, good manners, a gentle nature. Yet he was so strong. Men who approached me only had to look at Morgan and they went away. It was his eyes, the way he fixed his eyes on you."

She smiled at the picture. "I never knew what he did. He said he was in the importing business, but was in Seminole Landing for his health for a few years. I suppose I didn't want to ask too many questions. He was a silent man, yet he never seemed silent with me.

"I was already thirty, too choosy, my mother had said, and there were no men here I really liked. Father owned the bank once, but we lost it, and there we were, the poor aristocrats. Morgan appeared and he was a man, a real man. Perhaps my judgment was warped by being a thirty-year-old

beauty of the town who was too good for the local boys."

She sighed and laid the picture down. She looked up at Shayne. "So I married Morgan Fitch. Joseph was born. We had four good years. Morgan and Joseph were always together. Then he vanished. Just like that. One night he was gone. I never heard from him, saw him, or had the vaguest hint as to what happened to him.

"I tried to find some trace for a few years, but, do you know, I could never even learn how or precisely when he had left. No one who knew him in Seminole Landing seemed to know anything of why or how he had vanished."

She stopped and Shayne watched her. Under the story he could hear the faint music of the truth: Manny Dingan, syndicate member, hiding out, probably running a small branch here in Seminole Landing, and then called to higher things.

The call came, and Manny Dingen, alias Morgan Fitch, answered it, and forgot four years. His move covered, of course, by the local members of the syndicate.

Angela Fitch sighed. "It was a mistake, of course, to try to find Morgan. Everyone noticed, knew, and Joseph couldn't help feeling that something was wrong, young as he was. It became a wound festering in him and he never got over it. His father had deserted him, and me, and he could never forget. It made him wild."

"So Manny Dingan is Joe's father," Shayne said. "That's his private trouble. He must have met Joe down in Miami."

"And you think he is turning Joseph into a criminal? You think he had something to do with Joe's trouble, and broke him out of jail?"

"It makes sense. Dingan is bucking his own immediate boss, Lou Canio. He'd have to have a powerful reason. What I don't figure is why his trouble only seemed to start four months ago."

"That was when Joseph was arrested!"

Shayne nodded. "That could have been it."

"You mean he got to Joseph, then made some error and Joseph was caught? After that his conscience bothered him, and he arranged to break Joseph from prison?"

"It looks that way," Shayne said, "and along the line he worked against Lou Canio."

"Is that bad?"

"As bad as possible."

Shayne turned for the door. Angela Fitch stood up. She hovered behind him.

"Where are you going?" she said.

"I don't know. To try to find them."

"Where would Joseph go? You found him at the cabin, he won't go back there. Anne is dead."

"Yes," Shayne said. "The only idea I have is Dingan's own house."

"I'll dress and go with you."

Shayne turned. "No."

"Yes," she said. "My husband deserted me. Now he's turning my son into a criminal. I will come with you."

She walked from the room. Shayne had nothing more to say. He sat down and lit a cigarette and watched the heat grow beyond the windows.

XIV

MANNY DINGAN'S house was silent in the late morning. Dingan's car was not in the garage, but Mrs. Dingan's was. Mike Shayne went to the door. Angela Fitch went with him. On the trip down he had explained Mrs. Dingan to her. She had only nodded—Dingan and bigamy were not what was on her mind.

A maid opened the door. Mrs. Dingan was in her room; would they wait?

"Tell her it's Mike Shayne, and to hurry."

The maid sniffed, but went off. Moments later Mrs. Dingan was with them in the small study. Her face was pale, but she looked at Angela Fitch.

"Have you found Emmanuel?" she asked Shayne.

"Not yet, but I've found Morgan Fitch," Shayne said.

Mrs. Dingan frowned. "Morgan Fitch? I never heard—"

"This lady is Mrs. Fitch,"

Shayne said, "and Morgan Fitch is also Manny Dingan."

The two women stared at each other. Shayne told his story briefly and to the point. Mrs. Mabel Dingan listened. Her eyes never left the face of Angela Fitch. When Shayne had finished, she said only:

"Emmanuel and I never had children."

"I'm sorry," Angela Fitch said.

"The question," Shayne said bluntly, "is where is Manny now? Do you have any ideas, Mrs. Dingan?"

"You say he's in trouble with Lou Canio?"

"I think so."

"Then I can think of only one place he would be. We have an island off the coast just north of Miami. It's an isolated area, and Emmanuel always took great care to keep it a secret. I imagine he had something like trouble with Lou Canio in mind when he kept it so hidden."

"But you know where it is?"

"Yes, Mr. Shayne, I know," she said, and she looked at Shayne. "Will this mean trouble for Emmanuel?"

"Probably, but Lou Canio is worse trouble."

"And for the boy?"

"His only hope is to get away from Manny," Shayne said.

She nodded slowly. "All right. We'll take your car. It is quite a long drive."

It was a long drive. By the time

they had left the main highway and two secondary highways, and crossed two narrow bridges on a dirt road to the sea, it was already twilight. Mabel Dingan showed Shayne where he could park out of sight.

"There is a bridge to the island, but it is in poor repair, and it can be seen from the house. I know where there is a small boat, and a path that will keep us hidden."

Shayne nodded, and Mabel Dingan took the lead. They walked through heavy brush to where a small row boat was moored to the shore.

Shayne rowed them across. On the far side he tied up the boat and they climbed up a low hill along the path.

The house came into view after less than fifty yards.

It seemed deserted, and there was no car in sight. Mabel Dingan took them to the rear door, and opened it with her key. They went along a narrow hall and into the main part of the house. The rooms at this beach house were larger than the whole house of Angela Fitch in Seminole Landing.

"I don't think they're here, Mr. Shayne," Mabel Dingan said. "I'm afraid we've come for nothing."

"That makes two of us, Mabel!"

The voice came from a room to their right. Shayne whirled and his hand headed for his automatic.

"Don't, Shayne," Lou Canio said.

The boss racketeer stepped from the room with two of his silent, cold eyed men around him. Canio carried no gun, but his minions did. They carried them easily, the way ordinary men carry their hats, and their eyes showed neither eagerness nor reluctance to use them.

Shayne dropped his hands. "What's Manny up to, Canio?"

"You tell me, Shayne. Like I said before, I don't know what Manny's doing, only I don't like it at all anymore. Three of my boys are spread over a highway up north."

"You're losing, Lou."

"A skirmish, not the war," Canio said with a mirthless grin.

"Come off it; Lou, he's got you running in circles. You can't find him anymore than I can."

"What's your play, Shayne?"

Mabel Dingan stepped toward Canio. "I'm Mr. Shayne's play, Lou. I hired him. Emmanuel has been acting strange lately, so I hired Shayne to find out what was wrong."

"And what was wrong, Mabel?" Canio said softly.

"Don't you know yet, Lou?" Mabel Dingan said.

Canio shook his head. "No, I'm damned if I do. All I know is that, like you, I spotted Manny acting funny. So I had him tailed. He's been going to a Doc—a psychiatrist, I found out today. That I don't like."

"It's a private problem, Canio,"



Shayne said. "You could have saved a lot of trouble."

"Manny don't have no private problems," Canio said sharply. "He knows the rules. He got some personal beef, he comes to me and the others and tells us and we say what he should do about it! Now he's got real trouble! Three of my men!"

Canio glared all around. The boss gangster seemed to be thinking of his three dead men with purple fury. His hands clenched and unclenched.

Another of his men appeared from nowhere. "Mr. Canio!"

Canio turned. "Yeah?"

"Someone coming across the bridge."

"So get him!" Canio snarled. "Alive. If it's Manny, be careful."

The man vanished. In the hallway of the house they all stood and waited. The silence seemed to

hang like a club over them all. Canio paced, his face a black mask of anger and hate.

Three shots punctured the twilight outside.

Then silence.

They waited.

A door opened somewhere in the house, and the sound of violent struggle shook the halls. Someone cursed, and someone grunted. The struggle came closer. Canio motioned his two silent goons to go and help. They vanished.

Moments later a door burst open and a man half fell into the room at the end of a shove. Three of Canio's hoods came in behind him, breathing hard. One of them held his left arm and glared at the solitary man.

The man raised a bloody head, and he was not a man. He was a boy with the furrow of a bullet across his cheek.

"Joseph!" Angela Fitch cried, and ran toward Joe Fitch.

Two of Canio's team stepped out to stop her.

"Let her go," Canio snapped.

Joe Fitch glared around like a trapped animal, standing rigid as his mother put her arms around him. He wiped the blood from his face and looked all around.

Canio snapped, "Who are you?"

"Fitch, mister. Joe Fitch."

"Where's Manny Digan?"

"I don't know no Manny Digan," Fitch said. "Who the hell are you? What're you doin' here?"

"Don't get snotty, punk," Canio said coldly. "Who am I? I'll tell you, punk. Lou Canio, that's who I am."

Fitch's mouth dropped open. A wondering gleam came into his angry eyes as if he had seen the promised land.

"Lou Canio?" The boy said. "Gee, Mr. Canio, I always wanted to meet you."

The boy stared at Canio with awe and admiration. Shayne, Mabel Dingan and Angela Fitch watched the wounded boy.

"Joseph!" Angela Fitch cried.

Lou Canio began to laugh.

XV

CANIO LAUGHED, said, "Maybe you're not so dumb after all, kid. So you wanted to meet Lou Canio, huh? Well, now you've met him. Tell you what, boy, maybe we can do business."

Fitch beamed through his blood. "Anything you say, Mr. Canio. I'm tired of the small time. They pushed me around too much. I want mine."

"Everyone wants his, kid. That's the name of the game," Canio said. "You sound like you got some brains. Okay, you want yours, and I want mine. Right now I want Manny Dingan. You throw in with me, and maybe we can work it out."

Fitch shook his head. "I don't know no Manny Dingan."

"Knock it off, kid," Canio snarled, "I thought we was goin' to have a deal? You been traveling with Manny the last couple days. I know that. Three of my boys got killed."

The boy looked bewildered. "No, I been with my father, Morgan Fitch. I mean, I never knew my father, see? So after I broke out of the pen this guy comes to me up at the old cabin. It's my Dad! He was old now, only I knew him. He helped me. We got away and all."

Canio stared. "Your father? Morgan Fitch? What the hell is this?"

Shayne said, "He's telling the truth, Canio. Manny Dingan was Morgan Fitch twenty years ago in Seminole Landing. Joe here is his boy. All Manny's been doing is trying to help his kid. You got way off base, and you got worried about nothing."

Canio swore. "Nothing? Manny Dingan goes off his rocker over a kid he got twenty years ago, and I got worried about nothing? He went to a head-doctor and spilled his guts! He killed three of my men for a two-bit punk who never meant beans. He didn't tell the organization!"

Canio's eyes glinted like live coals. "Nothing? It looks to me like Manny cracked wide open, off his rocker. Manny's gettin' old, real old, when he starts cracking 'cause his conscience bothers him for run-

nin' out on a dame twenty years back. He's dangerous."

"And when a man's dangerous, you stop him, right?" Shayne said.

"I stop him," Canio said softly, "and all his friends."

Joe Fitch said, "Not me, Mr. Canio! I'm with you. I don't care about him. Man, I owe him for what he done to me!"

Canio laughed. "Hell, kid, maybe you do at that. Yeah."

Angela Fitch cried, "Joseph, no!"

"Why, Ma? He run out on us! Now his dirty conscience is bothering him?" the boy snarled.

Shayne said, "Don't be a damn fool, Joe. You think Canio is a big man? You admire him? You want to be like him?"

"You bet I do! Get mine, that's the story!"

"You tell him, kid," Canio grinned.

Shayne ignored the gangster boss. His gray eyes were fixed on Joe Fitch, on the boy's bloody, bitter, stubborn face. His voice was low and hard.

"You don't love your father, Joe. No reason you should. You don't care what happens to Manny Dingan."

"Not a damn!" the boy snapped.

"Who did you love, Joe?" Shayne bored on, hammering at the boy. "Tell me, Joe? Who? Your mother? She doesn't want you to help Canio."

"She ain't got no say!"

Shayne brushed the air. "Who else, Joe? Your wife? Did you love Anne? Maybe you didn't give a damn about her either."

The boy paled. He stepped at Shayne. "What do you know about Anne? Go on, tell me?"

Canio said, "Tell him, Shayne."

"I'll tell him. Canio killed her, Joe. He crushed her like a bug. He even did it himself, because he wanted to know about Manny Dingan."

"Lay off, Shayne," Canio said. "I told you I got an alibi."

"Hanson?" Shayne said. "No, you don't have an alibi. Hanson cracked, Canio. He told. He's told once, and he'll tell again. The cops'll get it out of him. You panicked, Lou. You were so worried about what Dingan was up to that you did a killing yourself."

Canio laughed again. "You can't prove it, peeper."

There was a deep silence in the room. Shayne looked at Joe Fitch. The boy's face was a mask of confusion, of conflict. He wanted to join Canio, defy the world, but he had loved his wife.

Shayne said, "I don't have to, Canio. Look at the boy."

Canio shrugged. "So what? So the kid knows, and you know, and the two dames know. None of you get out of here now."

"Someone else knows, Lou," Shayne said. "Manny Dingan knows. It was Manny who beat it out of Hanson."

Canio went pale, but his thin lips curled. "So Manny knows, Manny ain't around. I'll just—"

They all heard the sound. A light footstep up on the stairs that led from the hall to the second floor of the island house. The women looked up. Canio didn't. Two of his thugs did, raised their pistols.

A shotgun roared twice. Two violent blasts.

Both of Canio's gunmen seemed to leap off the floor like acrobats, fly backwards, and crash like two sacks of flour, limp and boneless, blood flying all over the walls.

Manny Dingan stood halfway down the stairs with the shotgun in his hands.

"It's an automatic ten-gauge, Lou," Dingan said. "I've got more shots."

XVI

MANNY DINGAN came carefully down the stairs with the big shotgun trained on Lou Canio.

"Emmanuel!" Mabel Dingan cried.

"I'm sorry, Mable," Dingan said. "Lou was right in a way, I guess I cracked a little."

The stocky racketeer's eyes turned slowly to look at the tiny figure of Angela Fitch. She smiled.

"Hello, Morgan. It's been a long time."

Dingan nodded. "A long time, Angie. I'm not going to give you

any explanations. Twenty years is a long time. I had my reason then. I'd do it again. Only we never had any kids, Mabel and me, so—"

Joe Fitch snarled, "So you figured you cosy up to me! After running out, leaving Ma and me! You bastard!"

Manny Dingan nodded slowly. "I know, I got it coming. Go on, Joe, say it all, you got the right."

Joe Fitch laughed nastily. "Hell, it don't matter now, old man. Canio'll get you sure, or one of your other pals will."

"I guess so," Manny Dingan said, and looked at Canio. "Only it won't be Lou. You killed the girl, Lou. For that I'm going to finish you, too."

Canio said nothing. Mike Shayne realized that the boss gangster was playing for time, waiting.

"You didn't have any kids, Dingan," Shayne said, "so you decided to help Joe by making him a criminal like you?"

Dingan shook his head. "You got it all wrong, mister." The gangster looked at his wife, Mabel. "I guess I owe you, Mabel. About four months ago I heard about a punk kid named Joe Fitch getting three years for a stupid caper. Joe Fitch! You know? I remembered. Twenty years ago. I didn't know if it was the same Joe Fitch, but it did something to me."

Dingan looked sad and the shotgun lowered. "I couldn't sleep remembering. I thought about

those days, and little Joe, and Angie. It carved me up inside. Twenty years I hadn't thought about those days. I was too big: Manny Dingan, the big man in the rackets.

"It was breaking me apart. So I took trips to think, only that didn't help. That's when I went to Dr. Bokar. He told me I had to face the past or go crazy. So I looked up Joe's wife. I talked, and she talked, and I knew Joe Fitch was my Joe Fitch. I wanted to help. I was figuring out ways to get him out, to help him go straight.

"I didn't want him to be like me, no. It was driving me nuts. Then Joe busted jail. All by himself. I went around to Anne's place and she was dead. So I waited, but Joe didn't come. I got to thinking where he'd go. I remembered the cabin up near Seminole Landing.

"When I got there Joe was already in trouble. I helped him out of it. I got Canio's punks. We came back to Miami to find out what happened to Anne. I got to Hanson and got the story, only I didn't tell Joe. I didn't want him going after Canio. We split up and came here."

Joe Fitch sneered. "So you just wanted me to go straight? Big deal. You say Canio killed Anne, only you've done a lot of killing yourself."

"Yeah, a lot," Dingan said. "I ain't no better than Lou."



"So why should I listen to you? You took everything away from me, and now I want what you have!" Joe Fitch said.

"Listen, Joe—" Dingan began.

He got no farther. His shotgun had swung away from Canio.

The boss gangster shouted: "Now!"

Two of his gunmen appeared from nowhere. Canio dove for cover, clawing for his own gun. Shayne knocked the women away. Dingan recovered. Joe Fitch just stood there.

Canio's two gunmen fired at Dingan. Hit in the shoulder, Dingan went down. His shotgun came up and blasted before he hit. One of Canio's men slammed back against the wall without a face left. His gun slid away toward Shayne.

Shayne grabbed it, fell on his face, and got Canio's second and last gunman before the hood could fire again.

Canio and Dingan were up. Joe Fitch picked up one of the first of Canio's gunman's pistols.

Lou Canio fired first and Manny Dingan spun and slammed into a wall, bounced off with his knees sagging. Canio laughed. Joe Fitch just stood there, the gun in his hand.

Shayne could not fire. Canio was in the cover of a chair. The boss gangster laughed again and aimed at Joe Fitch. His pistol roared.

Manny Dingan, with a powerful effort, jumped in front of his son. Canio's shot caught him in the chest and he went down. Canio came up from his cover and aimed at Joe Fitch again.

"Sorry, kid, but you got to go," Canio said.

The shot never came. On the floor Manny Dingan raised his shotgun once more and blasted Lou Canio's face into a mask of blood.

XVII

THEY ALL STOOD around the dying Manny Dingan. Canio's last men had gone fast after their boss had died. It was time to think of themselves, to regroup, and they had to find out who they should serve next. For all they knew the next boss would be a friend of Manny Dingan's, so they ran and ran fast.

The two women knelt beside

Dingan. Joe Fitch still stood in the center of the hallway with his gun in his hand. He was looking down at his father.

Mike Shayne looked at Dingan's wounds. There was no chance. It was a miracle that Manny Dingan still breathed.

"Easy, Dingan," Shayne said.

Dingan brushed at the air, pushed. "No. Listen. Joe, I want Joe."

The boy did not move. Shayne and the two women stood out of Dingan's way. The dying gangster looked up at his son.

"Joe, listen to me. Go back. You hear? Turn yourself in. That'll make it easier on you. Three years and you're out. Three years and it's over, all of it. Joe, I ran out on you, and hurt you, now I'm trying to make it up. Go back. Don't become like me, like Canio."

Joe Fitch said nothing.

"Joe," Dingan croaked. "This whole thing, it was to try to stop you being like me. Look at my life! Look at Canio's life. Look at us now!"

Joe Fitch shrugged. "What chance have I got? It's too late."

"No, Joe," Dingan whispered. "Mabel and your mother, they'll help you. Stay away from the organization. Listen, Joe! Think. Think about Anne. Canio killed her. He didn't kill her because she was a threat, or because she was dangerous. No. He killed her just

to find out if maybe I was doing something he didn't want me to do!

"He swatted her down like a nothing just because she might know something he wanted! We kill just for that, Joe. You want to be like us? Like me and Canio?"

Joe Fitch started to cry. "I—. Just because she might know something. He didn't even know if she knew. Just like that."

"That's it boy," Dingan said, stronger. "That's what you'd be. An animal. Like me and Canio. I even ran out on you and your mother just to be a big man. Rich and powerful, that was me. Big man in the syndicate. Take a look, boy. Take a look at me and Canio, and then think about your wife!"

"I—I'll go back, Dad," Joe Fitch said.

Angela Fitch began to cry and went to her bloody son. He held her.

Mabel Dingan watched them.

Shayne went to the telephone and called Will Gentry long distance. He told the Chief that Joseph Fitch had voluntarily given himself up, and would be coming in with Shayne. He told Gentry that the boy had harmed no one.

When he hung up he turned to Dingan. The gangster lay on the floor with a smile on his face.

Mabel Dingan looked at her husband.

"He's dead," Shayne said.

Joe Fitch and his mother looked. Manny Dingan had died by himself, while no one was watching. Mabel Dingan began to cry.

"He's okay," Shayne said. "He got what he wanted."

Shayne took Joe Fitch and his mother back over the small bridge, where he had left his car. Mabel Dingan stayed in the house.

As soon as Shayne and the others were well on their way to Miami, she would call the police and tell them that there had been a terrible gang battle at the island house.

Joe Fitch would not be mentioned, and no one would ever tell. It was the way Manny Dingan would have wanted it.

Shayne felt that he owed the dead gangster that much. Dingan had been a killer and a parasite sucking the blood of society, but in the end he had been only a man with a terrible pain in his conscience for what he had done to his son. A deadly conscience, but, in his own way, he had maybe made up twenty years and saved one boy from going the wrong way.

All the way to Miami, Mike Shayne felt pretty good.

The Dismal Flats Murder

A New LUCIUS LEFFING Story

by JOSEPH PAYNE BRENNAN

Who—or what—was it, that charred, silent thing on the marshes? Only two people in the world could know. A blackened, grinning skeleton—and my friend Lucius Leffing.

AS I LOOK through the notes of cases associated with my investigator friend, Lucius Leffing, I find comments on one affair, which I have entitled *The Dismal Flats Murder*.

The case, which appeared baffling to begin with, was made to seem simple in solution once my friend applied himself to it.

The Dismal Flats are a succession of level marsh meadows lying adjacent to one of the major highway routes which skirt the southern part of New Haven. This swampy wasteland, overgrown with cattails and creepers, is one of the most desolate stretches anywhere in the entire region.

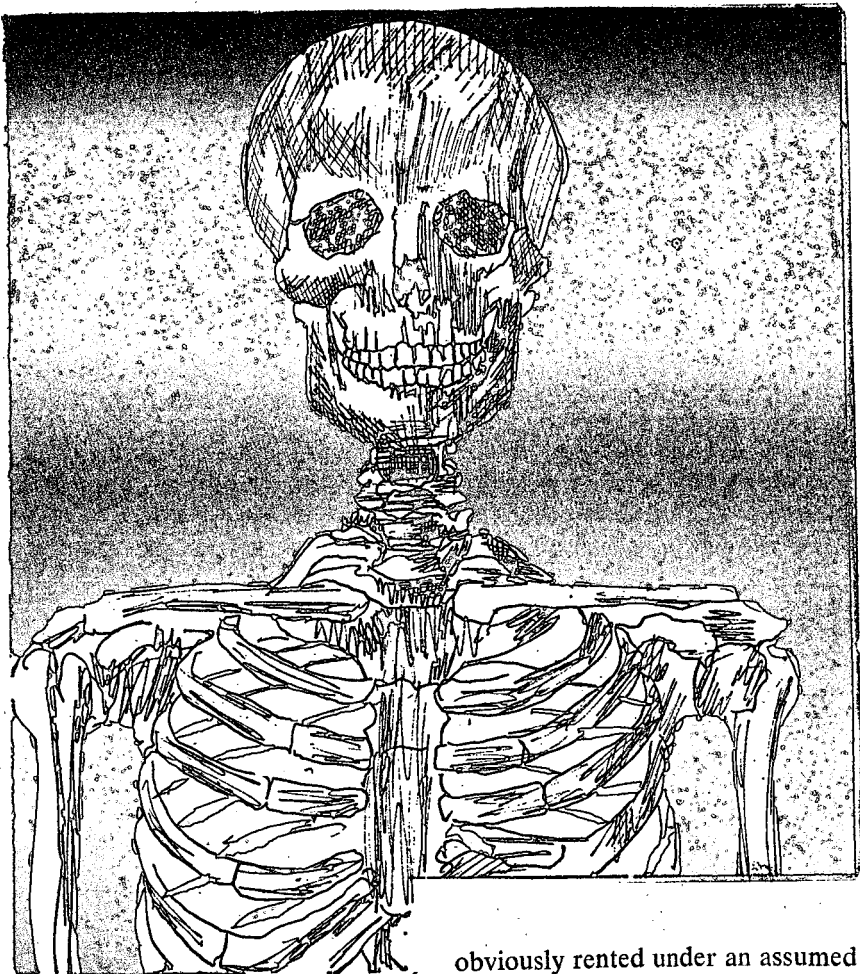
The business began one bitterly cold November night, when motorists passing on the highway route noticed an explosion of flame leap

into life out on the flats, a relatively short distance from the road. Firemen were summoned, but by the time they arrived the marsh itself was swept by sheets of flame.

Several hours later, after the fires had been extinguished, it was found that the conflagration had apparently originated in a car which was located about a quarter of a mile down a narrow dirt road which wound into the marsh. The car, obviously torched, was a burnt-out hulk. When the glowing metal had cooled, searchers probing the interior found the charred skeleton of a man.

Identification proved impossible. The coroner's report could say only that the skeleton was that of a male, of average height, and of the middle years.

Since the teeth, surprisingly per-



haps, were in near-perfect condition, it was not possible to make any identification through dental charts. In addition, the vehicle was ultimately traced to a cut-rate, used-car rental garage. It had been

obviously rented under an assumed name.

The rental agency was able to give no good description of the customer who had hired their car. There the matter stood. The local police admitted that they were making no progress with the case.

At this point my friend Lucius

Leffing developed an interest in the affair. Sprawled comfortably in his Morris chair one evening, he set down his sarsaparilla glass and shook his head.

"There must be some lead, Brennan. I may just look into the matter!"

I replaced the satin glass agata bowl which I had been examining—rimmed and pale green, very scarce. "No pun intended, Leffing, but I fear the case is at a dead end. Certainly the police here have explored every possibility."

My friend frowned.

"Your enthusiasm never fails to inspire me!" he commented with some asperity.

"Very well then," I replied. "How will you begin looking into the business?"

Leffing leaned back in his chair. "I suppose a trip to Dismal Flats would be first on the agenda."

Accordingly, early the next morning I drove to seven Autumn Street. Leffing appeared promptly. Not long after eight o'clock I pulled into the dim dirt road which led from the highway into the forlorn, frost-chilled marsh area known as Dismal Flats.

Almost entirely screened by high cattails, the dirt road was nearly invisible from the highway. We drove slowly, however, and Leffing's sharp eyes spotted the faint track.

It ran for only a short distance, ending in a cul-de-sac which was

just large enough for two or three cars.

We got out, shivering in the cold air, and looked around. The burnt-out murder car had been towed away, but even under the glaze of frost we could see a big circle of blackened earth.

The reeds for yards around had been swathed down by tongues of flame.

While I stood swinging my arms, Leffing prowled about. Hunching over, he examined the ground carefully.

Finally he straightened up, shaking his head. "Nothing of interest, Brennan."

I started toward the car. "Just as I expected. Let's head for home and hot coffee!"

He held up his hand. "Not quite yet."

Gazing out over the silent waste of reeds and marsh grass, he turned slowly, taking in all points of the compass.

To our rear, less than a half mile down the skimpy dirt road, lay the highway. A mile or more in front of us, across a succession of ice-coated muddy flats, a railroad track ran on a raised embankment.

To our right the swamp straggled on into a thick tangle of creeper-laden trees which shut off any further view. To our left, across the marsh, presumably on filled ground, lay a large rectangular building. A high, orange-colored sign identified it as the

Elite Electrical Corporation—
New Haven Branch.

Leffing moved toward the car. "No clues, but at least we have seen the locale. One never knows!"

After eggs and toast at seven Autumn Street, my own work forced me to leave. I could tell, however, that in spite of our futile trip out to Dismal Flats, Leffing was determined to look further into the case.

He accompanied me to the porch.

"I may just drop down to Headquarters and examine the contents of the murder car," he said. "I trust the ashes have been pretty thoroughly sifted over by now."

I went down the steps.

"You surmise," I asked, turning, "that our local experts may have missed something?"

"Not likely, Brennan, but possible—just possible!"

That same evening I stopped again at seven Autumn Street.

"Any luck?" I inquired, easing into an antique Victorian chair.

Leffing sat down nearby. "The yield was actually quite meager. Mixed with the ashes were a belt buckle, a cheap tie clasp, a partially melted zipper, imitation pearl shirt buttons, and a few coins. It would appear that none of these items can be traced."

I shook my head. "The case must be abandoned then."

Leffing put his long fingers together. "Perhaps. And yet con-



sider the articles I have mentioned. Does nothing singular strike you about this list of items?"

I thought a moment and shrugged. "It seems quite ordinary to me. Just about what one might expect."

Leffing got up and began to pace the room. "Brennan, you disappoint me. There are times when you fail to concentrate properly. You are half right, of course. The list of items is ordinary and what one might expect. But I would call your attention to what the list does *not* include!"

I frowned. "Well—keys?"

Leffing nodded. "Good. A good try. And again you are not wrong. But keys can be traced; they are one of the first things a murderer would remove from his victim's pockets. You can think of nothing else?"

I fidgeted a moment and threw up my hands. "Nothing whatever."

Leffing sat down again. "Consider. A bitterly cold day. A used car which may or may not have

included a heater in good working order. We find shirt buttons, a trousers zipper, and a tie clasp—but *no jacket or coat buttons!*”

I hesitated. “The man wore a sweater!”

My friend inclined his head. “A sensible suggestion and I have weighed it. But it seems unlikely, in view of the tie clasp and the temperature.”

I sighed. “Well then, I must admit that I’m baffled once more. Unless the jacket or coat buttons were made of some kind of plastic which entirely disintegrated in the fierce heat which reduced the murdered man’s corpse to a charred skeleton.”

Leffing nodded. “Again you have hit on a possibility. We file it away mentally. It leads us nowhere, of course.”

I scrutinized him sharply. “You yourself possess an explanation which leads to a solution?”

“An explanation which might at least lead us to the identity of the murder victim!”

“What is the explanation?” I asked him.

“The coat or jacket buttons were deliberately removed by the murderer!”

I suppose my expression reflected my disappointment. “But aren’t most garments turned out in vast wholesale lots? Wouldn’t it be awfully difficult to trace a person through a few buttons off a vanished coat when there might be

identical buttons on hundreds of other identical coats?”

“Again you are correct, Brennan! But I am attempting to build a case on the assumption that these particular buttons were distinct in type—so distinct that they might have revealed the identity of the victim and perhaps even that of the murderer!”

I frowned. “What kind of buttons would do that?”

Leffing gestured impatiently. “My dear Brennan, you simply are not concentrating! A uniform, of course!”

I sat back. “You may be right, but I foresee interminable problems. How can you trace a missing person who might have been wearing a uniform? There are so many these days!”

“There are not so many as you might imagine. Aside from the public services—police, firemen, mailmen—there are not too many people wearing uniforms, except on the job. Once we’ve eliminated doormen, taxi drivers, public utility workers of various kinds, military personnel, uniformed bandmen—”

“You needn’t extend the list!” I interrupted. “Once you’ve eliminated those categories, the murderer himself will have died of old age!”

A familiar crooked grin touched Leffing’s angular face. “Really, Brennan, you are so easily discouraged! Why, a few simple telephone

calls will answer most of my questions. Aside from that, I may have to make a personal inquiry or two!"

I stood up. "I wish you luck, then. I'm going home to bed!"

Two evenings later, when I stopped in again at seven Autumn Street, I saw at once that Leffing had had no success. Slumped in his Morris chair, he greeted me morosely.

"No progress?" I asked, sitting down in response to a wave of his hand.

He shook his head. "There does not appear to be a missing—unidentified—person in the whole of New England!"

"Perhaps," I suggested, "you had better drop the business."

I could see his lips tighten. "Not yet. Not so easily. You know me better. I still think the solution lies in those missing buttons!"

There was little more I could say. After a few random remarks, I got up to leave. Leffing did not urge me to remain.

As I drove home, I visualized him sitting alone there in his Morris chair, perhaps half the night, sipping sarsaparilla, while that scalpel-like brain of his probed for a solution.

The days passed and I became absorbed in the press of my own affairs. On several different occasions when I had planned to stop in at Leffing's, something intervened to prevent it.

I had begun to assume that my

friend had failed in his efforts to solve the Dismal Flats murder when I received a dramatic phone call from him.

"We have the identity of both victim and murderer, Brennan! What's more, a formal signed confession was taken just today!"

I drove from Westville to Autumn Street in record time. Settled in a comfortable antique chair in Leffing's Victorian living room, I asked for details.

My friend leaned back and put his long fingers together.

"You will recall that rutted dirt trace which leads from the main highway route into the reedy morass of Dismal Flats?"

I nodded. "Assuredly. Where you searched for clues at the murder site."

"Sometimes, Brennan, the only clues lie in the patient linkage of prosaic facts, and in their correlated significance. I noticed, for instance, that at the high speeds which prevail on the highway adjacent to Dismal Flats, only an unusually observant driver would even notice that dim dirt road which leads to the murder site. It is almost entirely screened by towering cattails which grow right to the edge of the highway."

"I would have driven right past it had you not pointed it out."

"I was looking for it, of course. But to continue. As I reflected on this fact—the dim, screened-off dirt road—it occurred to me that

only a person familiar with the area would be likely to know about it.

"And then something else occurred to me. You recall that high, orange-colored sign, advertising the plant of the Elite Electrical Corporation, visible over the marsh tangle."

"Yes, I remember it."

"Well, I reasoned that a car which intended to turn in at the cut-off which leads to the Elite Electrical plant would necessarily begin to slow down *at approximately that point where the dirt road is located!*"

"Marvelous!" I exclaimed.

"In other words," he continued, "it seemed highly probable to me that anyone driving regularly to the Elite Electrical plant would notice the dirt road. Did it follow, then, that our victim, familiar with the road, was actually employed at the plant? And had he arranged a lethal rendezvous on that road with the man who was to be his murderer?"

"Go on!"

"I determined to find out. Almost at once, it seemed, my hopes were extinguished. No Elite Electrical employees were missing."

Pausing, Leffing sipped a glass of sarsaparilla.

"At this point," he went on, "I fell back on my theory concerning the missing coat buttons. But how fit in a uniform with the Elite Electrical plant? None of the plant

employees wore any special uniform, aside from ordinary work clothes."

"I fail to see a glimmer at this stage," I confessed.

A wry smile flickered over his thin face. "When the solution came, it was all so obvious, I was furious at myself for having taken so long to reach it!"

I sat on the edge of my chair. "Continue!"

"As you are undoubtedly aware, most large plants employ watchmen. A few hire their own, but nowadays the majority avail themselves of the services of various security organizations—actually private detective agencies. A two-minute telephone call revealed the fact that the Elite Electrical Corporation had a guard contract with the Silver Badge Security Service!

"The Silver Badge guards, I soon learned, all wear distinctive uniforms. They patrol the Elite Electrical plant on evenings and weekends!"

"The murder victim was an employee of the Silver Badge Security then?"

"Exactly. In response to my inquires, the Silver Badge people informed me that one of their part-time guards who filled a second shift at the Elite Electrical plant had failed to report one evening and had not been heard from since.

"Actually, they attached little importance to the matter. Their

part-time employees are usually drifters who come and go. Right at this period, due to the lack of good qualified help, they have been forced to lower their standards somewhat. Every now and then one of their new employees float off, often without bothering to turn in his uniform.

"The situation exasperates the Silver Badge front office, but they feel they will have to make the best of matters until employment roles loosen up a bit. It never occurred to them to link their latest missing guard with the charred skeleton found in the burned car."

"How was identity established?"

Leffing sipped his sarsaparilla. "It was not established for some little time. The Silver Badge office had fingerprints and a photograph, but under the circumstances this was not enough to prove that the corpse was the missing guard. The car rental agency was unable to identify the guard's photograph.

"Personnel in the plant recognized the photograph, of course. They had seen the guard come in to begin the second shift. With that fact established, I move ahead, playing out my hunch—theory, call it what you will—concerning the missing buttons."

"What on earth was your next move?"

"You will recall, Brennan, that in my younger days I had the benefit of some trifling theatrical experience. With a make-up kit

and a Silver Badge uniform it was relatively easy for me to pass as the missing guard, whose name, incidentally, was William Hanrickson.

"One evening, having been appraised of my duties in advance with the cooperation of the personnel manager of the Elite Electrical plant, I reported for the second guard shift, at four in the afternoon."

"Good heavens! What was the purpose of that?"

"The obvious purpose, Brennan, was to catch the murderer!" Leffing said.

"But how did you know he worked in the Elite plant?"

"I didn't know. I assumed. Or perhaps only-hoped. Or, again, just played a hunch!"

"How did you trap him?"

"He trapped himself. No one in particular paid any attention to me. Most of the regular employees left at five, an hour after I arrived. A few managerial personnel remained. One of these was the assistant plant foreman, Mr. John Bealby."

"What happened?"

"What happened was that as soon as he saw me Mr. Bealby stood frozen in his tracks with a face the color of faded parchment! I feared he might have a heart attack on the spot. However he finally made his way to his private office. I moved in immediately with two New Haven detectives

who were stationed in the building and they made the arrest.

"Even after he realized how he had been tricked, the fight stayed out of Mr. Bealby. He admitted the murder that same evening. As I surmised, he had ripped the buttons from the guard's jacket in order to forestall identification."

"An incredible tale! But what was the motivation for murder?"

Leffing shrugged a bit wearily. "The old familiar story. Bealby, the assistant plant foreman, had been staying after hours and loading up his car with expensive electrical equipment. The guard, Hanrickson, caught him at it. The Elite people were aware that equipment was disappearing but had assumed that it was being stolen in transit. Nobody suspected poor Bealby!

"Well, caught red-handed, Bealby offered to make a substantial payment if the guard Hanrickson would hold his tongue. Hanrickson, a down-at-heels salesman existing on meager commissions, and deeply in debt, agreed. You can guess the pattern from there on in. Hanrickson kept demanding more payments until Bealby grew desperate.

"Under pressure, Bealby agreed to meet Hanrickson on that dim dirt road running into Dismal Flats. He had finally convinced Hanrickson that it was too dangerous for them to make blackmail arrangements in the plant.

"We may have trouble proving premeditation. Apparently Bealby hoped that a final payment might satisfy Hanrickson. But it must have become apparent to him, as he argued with the blackmailer on that isolated road in the marsh, that his tormentor would go on bleeding him without mercy.

"He confessed that in a fit of insane desperation and fury he attacked Hanrickson with his fists, knocking him out. He then ripped the Silver Badge buttons from Hanrickson's uniform, took his wallet and keys, doused the body and car with gasoline, hurled a blazing torch into the car and fled."

"Had you not concentrated on those missing buttons," I commented, "Bealby might have gone scot-free!"

Leffing nodded. "Quite possibly. Yet I must confess that I hope poor Bealby escapes the ultimate penalty. I have always felt that blackmailers deserve the worst that can happen to them."

He surveyed his empty sarsaparilla glass. "Suppose we have a bit of brandy to celebrate the conclusion of the case, Brennan?"

"I helped even less than usual on this one," I said with a grimace. "The brandy should be all yours."

My friend arose with a smile. "Brennan, you provide more support than you ever realize!"

He brought out the brandy bottle, choice *Folle Blanche* cognac, cask-mellowed for thirty years.

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THE NEW HAND

*He was a madman, a killer, and she—she
was a buxom lady who loved money and
men. She smiled. "Come here, John," she said.*



by **RICHARD DEMING**

AT THE TIME she decided to marry Amos Bull it had seemed a good idea to Gladys. He was forty years older than her buxom thirty and was confined to a wheelchair. He also had a heart condition no one knew about but Amos, his doctor and Gladys. Amos didn't want anyone to know, but as his practical nurse Gladys had to be taken in on the secret. According to Dr. Featherstone Amos might drop dead at any instant.

And he was rich—by the standards of Tarheel County at any rate. He had a mortgage-free hundred-acre farm with a fine house and barn on it, forty thousand dollars worth of paid-for farm machinery, close to twenty thousand dollars in the bank and another ten thousand in insurance. Something to go after.

He also had no children by his deceased first wife and no living brothers or sisters. It seemed to Gladys that a wife wouldn't have

A Short Story of Shocking Impact



to wait too long before she inherited the whole kaboodle.

Six months later, when it developed that Amos wasn't quite ready for the grave after all, she was profoundly regretting her decision.

Old Doc Featherstone, who had been treating Amos ever since the tractor accident which paralyzed him from the waist down fifteen years before, died, and a new young doctor named Boyd took over his practice.

After giving Amos a thorough physical examination, young Dr. Boyd confirmed Dr. Featherstone's opinion that there was no hope of Amos ever walking again, but reported that he found no evidence of the heart condition the old doctor had been treating.

"I don't like to disparage the ability of another doctor," Boyd told Amos in Gladys's presence. "Particularly a man who is no longer here to defend himself. But it's apparent Doctor Featherstone made a bad diagnosis. You tend to have an excess of gas, which might make you think you were suffering periodic mild heart attacks but it certainly should never have fooled a doctor. Your heart is as strong as one of your animal namesakes'. You'll probably live to be a hundred."

On top of this blow to Gladys's hopes, Amos's personality underwent a drastic change when he learned he wasn't going to die. During the years he had existed in

the belief that he might drop dead at any moment, his disposition had been notoriously serene because he was afraid the least surge of anger might bring on a fatal heart attack.

Although he was by no means a spendthrift, he had also inclined to be rather generous, his philosophy being that it was silly to pinch pennies when he couldn't possibly live long enough to spend everything he had.

When Amos learned that he probably had another whole generation of life ahead of him, all the grouchiness he had been suppressing for fifteen years seethed to the surface. And now that he had to spread his substance over three more decades, he suddenly became overly thrifty.

His first move was to fire Mrs. Coats, the housekeeper, and inform Gladys she could take over her duties. His second was to demand a strict accounting of every cent Gladys spent. He began vetoing all expenditures he didn't regard as essential, such as beauty shop appointments in town, even cosmetics from the drugstore.

Any such extravagance as a new dress he wouldn't even discuss. And if she bought anything without his advance permission, it automatically went back to the store, even if it were some necessary household item such as new sheets for their beds.

Originally Gladys had come to

the farm as a practical nurse in answer to an ad run by Amos, who, following one of his more severe "attacks," decided he needed more constant care than Mrs. Coats had time to give him. As a practical nurse her duties had been relatively light, she had gotten her keep and a salary on top of it.

Six months after the wedding she still got her keep, but her duties had approximately tripled and she drew no salary.

Then, during the first part of June, just before harvest time, Amos let his newly developed bad temper spill over at Jed Foley, the hired man, and Jed quit. Gladys tried to patch it up, but Jed would stay on only if he got a complete apology from Amos, and Amos refused to give him one.

Early on the morning of Monday, June 3rd, Amos and Gladys watched from the front porch as Jed Foley's battered old Model A Ford rattled down the lane for the last time toward the graveled road which edged the farm. As the Ford turned in the direction of town, Gladys glared at the man in the wheelchair.

"Now are you happy that you have no salaries at all to pay?" she spat at her husband. "I suppose you expect me to bring in the crop on top of my other chores."

Amos had the grace to let a sheepish look form on his craggy face, but he was incapable of accepting total blame.



"Jed was getting lazy anyway," he muttered. "Keep a hand on too long and he starts taking advantage and letting the place run down. After three years, it's time for a change anyway."

"And where do we find a new hand?" Gladys demanded.

"Put an ad in the Tarheel County Press," Amos said irritably. "It's the way I got you, worse luck."

Before she could reply, he quickly rolled his wheelchair down the ramp leading from the front porch to the ground and headed for the barn.

When Amos and his wheelchair had disappeared into the barn, Gladys went back into the house. She sat at the dining room table to compose a classified ad for a new hired hand, then phoned it in from the phone in the living room to the rural bi-weekly paper. That

matter taken care of, she went into the kitchen to do the breakfast dishes.

She had finished washing the dishes, but hadn't started to dry them yet when she heard the front screendoor open and slam again. Amos's voice called, "Gladys, come here a minute!"

His tone held none of the demand she was beginning to expect whenever he spoke to her. It sounded surprisingly good-humored.

Gladys dried her hands and went through the dining room to the archway into the living room. Amos sat in his wheelchair in the center of the big room, and next to him stood a lean, well-muscled young man she guessed was in his early twenties. He was of average size, with brown eyes, recently-barbered brown hair and a rather nondescript but pleasant face which, at the moment wore a diffident expression.

He had on new looking, slightly too large tan work slacks and work shirt, both wrinkled as though he had slept in them, new looking high-topped work shoes, and he held in his hands a tan cloth cap somewhat resembling a baseball cap.

A straw, of which he was obviously unaware, was caught in a cowlick at the back of his head and stood straight up.

"This is my wife Gladys, John," Amos said pleasantly. "Gladys,

this is our new hired hand, John Brown."

When meeting both her and her husband for the first time, most people tended to look astonished at the difference in their ages, but the young man merely nodded shyly. Gladys said in a puzzled but polite tone, "How do you do?" then glanced at her husband for enlightenment.

"Found him sleeping in the barn," Amos explained. "Says he got here late last night. Everything was dark and he didn't want to wake us up to ask permission. He's been roaming around looking for farm work, so I hired him."

Gladys looked back at John Brown. "Do you know anything about farm work?"

Amos answered for the young man. With a touch of asperity he said, "I didn't buy a pig in a poke, woman. I put him through a long interview. I know all about where he's from, where he's worked and everything else."

With equal-asperity Gladys said, "Well, do you mind if I know too?"

"You can ask while you're fixing him breakfast," Amos told her. "He ain't et yet. Meantime I'll be checking what chores that lazy Jed's been letting go, so I can tell John what needs doing most."

He rolled his wheelchair over to the screendoor and pushed it open by butting his paralyzed knees against it. As the screen door

slammed behind him, Gladys called, "I already phoned in an ad for a hired man."

Amos paused to call back, "Well, phone again and cancel it."

He rolled on down the ramp to the ground.

Gladys said to the new hired hand, still standing humbly in the center of the room, "You want to wash up before breakfast?"

"Sure appreciate it, ma'am," he said shyly.

She showed him where the bathroom was, gave him a towel and washrag, then glanced at his light stubble of beard.

"You leave your gear in the —barn?" she asked.

"Lost it yesterday," he said apologetically. "Fellow gave me a ride, then drove off with my bag while I was in the restroom of a filling station where we stopped for gas. Don't think he did it on purpose. I mean, I think he meant to ditch me, but he just forgot about my bag in the back seat. All I got left is what I'm wearing."

"That's too bad," Gladys sympathized. "You can use my husband's razor, if you like."

She showed him where it was.

While John Brown was washing up and shaving, Gladys phoned the paper again and canceled the ad. Then she went to the kitchen and started making a breakfast of bacon, eggs, toast and coffee.

She had breakfast ready to serve when the new hired hand ap-

peared freshly shaven, with the cowlick combed out of his hair and the straw gone from it.

As she watched him eat, she plied him with questions. She had to pry information out of him, but she got the impression this was merely because he was shy, and not because he was deliberately secretive. He answered everything she asked readily enough; he simply didn't volunteer anything unless she asked.

He was only twenty years old, he informed her to her surprise. She had guessed him two to three years older. He told her he had grown up on a tenant farm in Arkansas, which also surprised her, because Gladys had come from that state too, and John Brown didn't have the accent she remembered. She had assumed from his voice that his origin was somewhere in the northeast.

He said he had been orphaned at sixteen, and rather than go live with an uncle he didn't like, he had run away. During the four years since then he had wandered all over the country as a transient farm worker. He had never worked in this area, he said. He claimed familiarity with all types of farm machinery.

After breakfast Gladys showed him the room off the summer kitchen which had been Jed Foley's, and told him he would sleep there. She also told him she would lay a few sets of Amos's older under-

wear and socks on his bed to hold him over until he could buy some. He was about Amos's size, except that the older man was broader through the shoulders.

John Brown thanked her and went to find Amos for work instructions.

Gladys switched on the small radio over her sink and resumed doing dishes. A program of country music was on. Just as she finished wiping and putting away the last dish, the music suddenly stopped in the middle of a record and an announcer's voice broke in.

"We interrupt this program to bring you a news bulletin," the voice said. "The sheriff's office has just reported to this station that an extremely dangerous patient escaped from the State mental hospital for the criminally insane at Railville last night.

"Missing from the maximum security ward of the Disturbed Wing of the hospital at roll call this morning was twenty-two-year-old Harry Childs, a psychopathic killer committed to the mental hospital three years ago while he was still a teen-ager upon conviction of the motiveless murders of three adults and two children during a wild, state-wide hitchhiking spree of robbery and murder in 1965.

"Hospital Superintendant Arthur Curtis says that Childs' escape went undetected at last night's bed check because he had placed a dummy made of rolled-up blankets

in his bunk. An investigation is underway to determine just how the patient got out of the locked ward, past another double locked door from the disturbed wing and through the locked gate of the hospital grounds.

"Harry Childs is described as five feet, ten inches tall and weighing one hundred and eighty pounds. He has brown hair and eyes, regular but undistinguished features. He was probably wearing a hospital work uniform of blue denim trousers, a blue flannel shirt and a blue denim jacket when he escaped. The jacket has *State Hospital, Railville*, stenciled both on its front and back.

"Superintendent Curtis says that Childs is diagnosed as a schizophrenic with marked homicidal tendencies and should be approached with extreme care. While his manner is usually quiet, and even withdrawn, any attempt to apprehend him could easily provoke the man into homicidal rage. Private citizens are urged to make no attempt to capture the man. If he is spotted, please merely phone your local police department or sheriff's office."

As music resumed, Gladys stood transfixed, staring at the radio.

Railville was no more than twenty miles away.

It had struck her instantly that, except for age, the description of the escaped mental patient fitted their new hired hand perfectly. And

John Brown could easily have lied about his age.

John Brown. The name practically screamed alias. Who, except married men registering in hotels with women other than their wives, or criminals hiding from the law, ever had such names as John Smith or John Brown? Gladys had never in her life met an actual person with either name.

But his clothing was nothing like



that described on the radio, she thought. Then she recalled its newness and poor fit, and wondered if perhaps he had broken into a clothing store somewhere. He would naturally want to get rid of his identifying uniform as soon as he was silly to expect him to continue wearing that. He was crazy, not stupid.

Her first reaction was to want to warn Amos of her suspicion. Then it occurred to her that if John Brown were the escaped maniac, he might be the solution to her problems. No one could blame her if her husband were murdered by a known psychopath.

The sticky question was how to

avoid being murdered along with Amos. Gladys had confidence in her ability to take care of herself in most situations, because she was hardly a defenseless woman. She stood five feet seven and weighed a solid, fatless one hundred and sixty pounds. Once, in her youth, she had discouraged a masher considerably larger than their new hired hand by knocking him unconscious with a single blow on the jaw.

But a man impelled merely by amorous desire was a different proposition from one impelled by homicidal rage, she knew. She rather doubted that she would be a match for a raving maniac who outweighed her by twenty pounds.

Then she thought of the gun in the top drawer of Amos's dresser. She went to the bedroom at the rear of the house to examine it.

The gun was fully loaded. It was a five-shot .32 caliber Smith And Wessen hammerless revolver. Although a relatively small gun, it sagged too obviously in the pocket of her apron, and there was no other place on her person Gladys could conveniently carry it.

After considering for a time, she had a brilliant idea. She found an old belt, pulled up her dress and looped it around the center of her right thigh for measurement. After cutting off the excess length, she threaded the shortened belt through the twin slits in the backside of the holster. It was unneces-

sary to punch a hole in the belt because the buckle was the pressure type.

After buckling the holstered gun to the outside of her right thigh and dropping her skirt over it, she examined herself in her dressing table mirror. Her skirt was full enough so that it didn't show when she was standing up. From her own twin bed she could still see her reflection in the mirror. She sat on the edge of the bed and examined herself again. In this position the bulge was quite noticeable.

She would simply have to avoid sitting in the presence of either Amos or the new hired hand except at the table, she decided.

She rose, went through the house and out onto the front porch. Amos's wheelchair was in the shade of the apple tree near the chicken-house and he was gazing off to the south. Looking that way, Gladys saw that the new hired hand was down at the stand of trees just this side of the cornfield. He was clearing the dense undergrowth beneath the trees with an axe.

A nice chore for Amos to have started him on, she thought with satisfaction. Maybe with an axe in his hand he would decide to use it on something more satisfying than mere underbrush.

Now that she was adequately protected, Gladys decided the best thing to do was simply let nature take its course. Knowing Amos,

it seemed unlikely to her that he could go a whole morning without letting his recently developed bad temper spill over at least once. And if "John Brown" really was Harry Childs, he might react by burying the axe in Amos' skull.

And if he wasn't the escaped mental patient, no harm had been done.

Gladys spent the morning doing household chores. Once she had performed a few of the outside chores, such as tending the chickens, slopping the pigs and watering the cow. She had never learned to milk it. But after Amos fired Mrs. Coats, Gladys flatly refused any further responsibility outside the house.

Now that Amos no longer had to pamper his heart, there was no reason he couldn't perform such chores himself as slopping the pigs, feeding the chickens, cleaning their coops, collecting eggs and running the milk separator, she announced. And the hired hand could perform the rest of the outside chores. She told Amos that running a ten-room house on top of caring for a wheelchair patient was enough for one woman.

Every hour on the hour the local radio station broadcast a five-minute news summary. Gladys paused in her housework each hour to catch this. Up until eleven the only new information about the escaped mental patient was that he had been reported seen about an hour

previously in the mountainous area forty miles south of Railville and that a posse with bloodhounds was combing that area.

The area designated was in the direction beyond Railville, which made it about sixty miles from the farm. If the man who had been spotted actually was the escapee, John Brown couldn't be, Gladys thought with disappointment.

Then the noon broadcast electrified her. An entire family named Sanders, consisting of two parents, a son and a daughter, had just been discovered at their farm hacked to death by an axe. Evidence seemed to indicate the murders had been committed the previous night.

The Sanders farm was about halfway between Railville and the Bull farm, only about ten miles away.

The announcer said, "An on-the-spot check of fingerprints on the bloody axe by a sheriff's crime lab technician has definitely established that the murderer was escaped mental patient Harry Childs. Sheriff's office investigators as yet have been unable to determine if the killer also robbed the farmhouse, but they surmise that he probably at least took along a change of clothes. All persons in the general area are urged to be wary of any strangers answering Harry Childs' description, regardless of his dress."

There then ensued a description

of the escapee identical to the first one Gladys had heard over the air, and which had been repeated every hour.

The announcer resumed, "The search of the mountains south of Railville has been called off and the posse is being trucked to the area surrounding the Sanders farm. In addition sheriff's deputies will be making personal calls on all farms within a twenty-five-mile radius of the murders to check on the residents' safety. Sheriff Osbourne—"

Gladys clicked off the radio because she heard the front screen door open. A moment later it slammed shut again and there was the sound of Amos's wheelchair rolling through the house. He rode it into the kitchen with the new hired hand trailing behind him.

"Dinner ready?" Amos inquired in a cheerful voice. He always called lunch "dinner."

"By the time you both wash up," Gladys said.

During lunch Gladys surreptitiously examined the young man who had given his name as John Brown. He certainly fitted the radio description of Harry Childs, although Gladys had to admit to herself that it had been a general enough description to fit half the men in Tarheel County.

Thinking about it, she decided she knew dozens of men who could be described as brown-haired, brown-eyed and of average height

and weight. Which was what the description really amounted to. She couldn't judge just by looking at him exactly how tall or heavy their new hired hand was. He might be an inch taller or shorter than the announced five feet ten, and ten pounds heavier or lighter than one hundred eighty.

The broadcast description might as well have said "average height and weight," for all the good accurate figures were. You couldn't very well measure and weigh every stranger who came along.

If he were mad, his eyes ought to give him away, she told herself. But he kept them downcast during the entire meal, so that she was unable to get a look into them. And the only expression on his face was one of diffidence, except when he occasionally showed amusement at one of Amos's jokes.

Amos told a lot of jokes. Gladys would have liked to attempt to draw the hired man out, but her husband was in an insufferably jovial mood and she couldn't get a word in edgewise. She hadn't seen the elderly Amos so amiably garrulous since the day Dr. Boyd told him he wasn't going to die. He seemed to have taken an unexpected and tremendous liking for the young stranger. All during lunch he directed a monologue of reminiscence, jokes and instructive comments about the farm at the youth.

John Brown was a perfect au-

dience. He said nothing himself other than appropriate monosyllabic replies whenever they seemed to be expected, and he chuckled with shy appreciation at all of Amos's jokes, even the bad ones.

If "John Brown" really was Harry Childs, Amos wasn't going to incite him to violence today, Gladys decided gloomily. Unaccountably Amos was suppressing his usual testiness and was turning on all his charm on this one occasion that Gladys didn't want him to. And he obviously had the new hand liking him as much as he liked the youth.

Amos put a further snag in Gladys's plans by deciding to take a nap after lunch. Although he frequently did, Gladys had hoped that today his interest in the new hand would keep him up. If the man who called himself John Brown actually was a homicidal maniac, something might have set him off despite his apparent rapport with Amos, if they remained in each other's company. But he was hardly likely to become enraged at Amos while the later was in bed asleep.

When the younger man went back to work after lunch, Gladys helped her husband from his wheelchair onto his bed, took off his shoes and covered him with a light blanket. While doing the lunch dishes, she considered her next move.

The important thing was to de-

termine definitely whether or not John Brown was the escaped mental patient, she decided. Perhaps if she could draw him into friendly conversation, he would make some slip giving himself away. Or at least his manner, or the expression in his eyes, if she could manage a good look into them, might indicate his madness.

She would have to be careful not to incite him into attacking her, because even though she had no particular fear of him with the pistol strapped to her leg, he could hardly kill Amos if she had to put a bullet in him. But so far he had shown her nothing but timid respect, and certainly had indicated no latent animosity. She had no intention of saying anything which might change his attitude by offending him.

When she finished the dishes, she raised her skirt and checked to make sure the gun slid freely in its holster, then dropped it over the gun again. After glancing in the rear bedroom to make sure Amos was asleep, she moved through the house to the front door and on outside, easing the screen door closed behind her so as not to awaken her husband.

She found John Brown in the barn. Apparently he had just finished cleaning out the cow's stall, because he was forking new hay into it from a pile he had tossed down from the hayloft above. Gladys paused in the doorway to

the barn, not caring to get too close to a possible madman when he had a pitchfork in his hands.

The axe he had used that morning now hung in its usual slot on the barn wall, she noted.

The hired man glanced her way, gave her a shy nod and went on forking hay.

"When will you start the harvest, John?" she asked by way of openers.

"Mr. Bull says early next week, ma'am," he replied without pausing in the rhythm of pitching hay.

Before she could frame another question, there came the sound of a car driving up the lane. Gladys glanced that way and saw it was a black sedan with an amber bubble on top and a circular yellow insigne on its door.

She looked back at John Brown, who had frozen to rigidity with the tines of the pitchfork buried in the hay pile in preparation to lift another forkful.

"It's a sheriff's car," she said quietly.

He straightened, the fork still in his hands, and gave her a wild look. Suddenly there was a hunted, cornered air about him which made her heart begin to pound.

His reaction convinced Gladys that he was the man she hoped he was. But now that she knew, it was almost too late. The moment the occupants of the sheriff's car saw him, her hopes of using him to free her of Amos would go up in smoke.

She made a quick decision. Jerking a thumb at the hayloft ladder, she said, "Up there. Quickly!"

The cornered look on his face turned to one of surprise, then to suspicion and, finally, as he studied the expression on her face, to uncomprehending gratitude. Dropping the fork, he ran to the ladder and scurried up it out of sight.

The sedan had halted next to the porch and a uniformed deputy was getting out of either side. Gladys stepped from the barn and waved to attract their attention. They both moved around in front of the vehicle to wait for her.

She knew the older of the two, a stocky, red-headed sergeant in his forties. Sergeant Brad Morris was an occasional customer for eggs. The muscular young man with him she had never seen before.

When she got over to where they were, both men touched their broad-brimmed hats. Sergeant Morris said, "Afternoon, Mrs. Bull. This is Deputy Mike Donnel."

"How are you, Mr. Donnel?" Gladys said politely. "And you, Sergeant?"

"Fine, Mrs. Bull," Morris answered for both of them. "Amos around?"

"He's taking an after-lunch nap."

"Oh. Well, we won't disturb him. Haven't seen any strangers prowling around, have you?"

Gladys shook her head. "You

mean the escapee from Railville?"

Sergeant Morris smiled wryly. "You heard it on the radio, huh? He's still at large, so be on the lookout. Are you taking any precautions?"

"Like what?" she asked.

"Well, does Amos own a shotgun or rifle?"

Gladys shook her head. "Apparently he never cared about hunting. All he owns is a pistol."

"Then I suggest you load it, give it to your hired hand and have him stick close to the house until this nut is caught."

Gladys quite suddenly saw her opportunity to have everything work out as she wished, even if the young man hiding in the hayloft refused to cooperate by going into a homicidal rage.

"It's already loaded, but our hired hand quit this morning," she said. Modestly turning her left side to the two men so that they couldn't see her exposed thigh when she raised the right side of her skirt, she drew the gun and showed it to them.

"I know how to use it, and I wouldn't have the slightest compunction about shooting that maniac if he showed his nose around here. You don't have to worry about me and Amos."

She slid the gun back into its holster, dropped her skirt and turned to face the men again. Both were regarding her with a mixture of surprise and admiration.

"I guess we won't worry about you," Sergeant Morris said with a chuckle. "Come on, Mike. Let's get on to the next farm."

When the deputies had departed, Gladys returned to the barn.

"They're gone," she called up to the hayloft. "You can come down."

The young man came down the ladder and stood looking at her from narrowed eyes. All the pretense of shyness had fallen away and there was an animal alertness about him. He wasn't studying her as though he considered her an enemy, however, but merely as though she were an unknown quantity.

Although nothing in his manner suggested he might be on the verge of physical attack, something made Gladys keep her distance and tense to draw her pistol if she had to.

"Well?" he asked finally.

"I knew about you before they showed up," she said. "It's been on the radio."

He gazed at her without comprehension. "Then why did you help me?"

"You seem to be an efficient farmhand," she said with a smile. She had read that it was best to keep smiling when dealing with an insane person.

He frowned. "That's a silly reason. I can't stay anyway, now that they're looking for me around here."

"For at least a few days you're

probably safer here than if you left," she said. "Since they've already checked here, they're not likely to be back for a while."

After considering this, he gave a reluctant nod. "I suppose. Does your husband know about me too?"

"Don't worry about Amos," Gladys said without really answering the question.

With the plan she had in mind, it didn't really matter whether Amos knew who the new hired man was or not.

The young man continued to study her, but now without suspicion and with growing comprehension.

"Your husband's pretty old, isn't he, Mrs. Bull?" he hazarded. "Or would you rather I called you Gladys?"

The almost lewd manner in which he ran his eyes over her buxom figure was in startling contrast to his former pretended shyness. His reaction rather startled her in another way too. She wasn't particularly surprised by his misinterpretation of her motive for wanting him to stay around, but she was by his instant acceptance of what he mistook for a romantic invitation. It hadn't occurred to her that an insane man might have sex urges as well as an urge to kill.

She decided that fast retreat would be wise before things got out of hand, but she also sensed that retreat might be just the thing to

send a maniac into a homicidal rage if it wasn't done with grace. She managed it so beautifully that he was both encouraged and stopped cold in his tracks.

Giving him her friendliest smile, she said, "Gladys is fine with me," which induced him to take a step toward her.

Then she cocked her head as though listening, said in a hurried voice, "I hear Amos," quickly turned and made for the house.

He followed as far as the barn door, but halted there. He was still standing there watching her when she glanced back just before going inside. She threw him another friendly smile.

Amos slept until three. When he called for Gladys, she went into the bedroom, put his shoes back on him and helped him into his wheelchair. He immediately rolled it through the house and out the front door.

Gladys waited for a time, just to give matters a chance to come to a head by themselves in case they were going to, then made preparations to help them along in case they didn't. About three-thirty she stuffed a pair of cotton work gloves in her apron pocket and went outdoors.

She found both men in the barn, and it was obvious matters weren't going to come to a head by themselves, because they were getting along as amiably as ever. Amos was watching the new hand sharp-

en tools on the foot-power grindstone. A pile of already sharpened tools lay on the workbench next to the grindstone and at the moment he was sharpening the axe.

Gladys was gratified. His fingerprints were already on the axe handle, of course, because he had used it all morning. But it didn't hurt to have a few on the smoother surface of the blade as well.

Both men glanced at her when she entered the barn, but neither spoke. The younger man took his foot from the grindstone pedal and tested the axe blade with his thumb.

Gladys walked to within three feet of him, raised her skirt, drew the gun and fired two shots into his chest. He dropped on his face without a sound.

Amos stared down at the fallen man in horrified disbelief. Gladys allowed the gun to fall from her hand to the barn's dirt floor and pulled on the work gloves. She picked up the axe.

Amos was gazing up at her in stunned and uncomprehending silence when she drove the blade through the top of his head.

Leaving both the gun and the axe lying there, she unhurriedly returned to the house. She put away the gloves, then went back into the front room to use the phone. It rang before she could pick it up.

"Hello," she said.

"This is Sergeant Morris again,

Mrs. Bull," the voice of the red-headed deputy said. "We're phoning everybody in the area to be on the lookout for another fugitive in addition to that crazy killer. Fellow named John Brown."

"John Brown?" she repeated stupidly.

"Uh-huh. Guy about twenty, five feet nine, hundred and seventy-five pounds, brown hair and eyes. Last seen wearing a surplus army suntan uniform without insignia and a cloth cap. He's not as dangerous as the other fellow.

Gladys said nothing.

"You still there, Mrs. Bull?" the deputy asked.

"Yes, Sergeant," she said numbly. "I'm still here."

"Brown is wanted for stealing a collection of rare gold coins worth several thousand dollars from a farmer he worked for up in the north part of the state. The reason we know he's in the area is that a traveling salesman who had picked him up as a hitchhiker ditched him at a gas station yesterday evening only a couple of miles from your place. He got suspicious that Brown was planning to stick him up, so just drove off while the guy was in the gas station rest room.

"He didn't realize the hitchhiker's valise was in the back seat until he discovered it there about noon today. By then he was in the next state. He took it to the nearest police station and their chief just phoned us. The coin collec-

tion was in the valise, and also all Brown's identification papers. We had already received a routine want on him, but until we got the phone call, we had no idea he was anywhere near here. If you spot anyone of that description, will you give us a ring?"

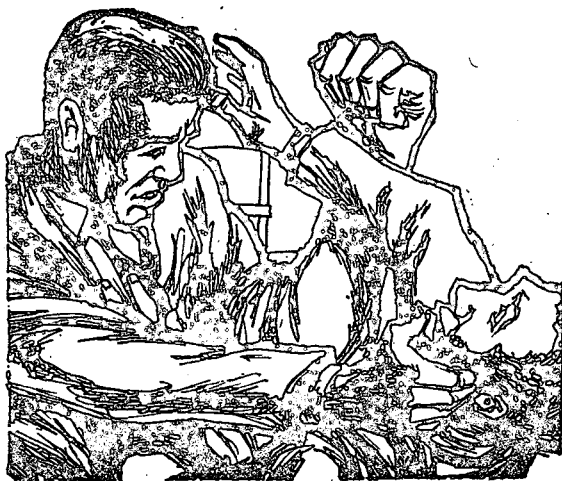
All the time the deputy was speaking, Gladys had been furiously thinking. Should she break in and tell him the wanted man had murdered her husband and she had shot him in return?

No, not at this moment, she decided. She needed more time to organize her thoughts and devise some plausible motive for John Brown to have attacked Amos with an axe. She could always phone back and pretend the killings had occurred since this phone call.

She simply said, "Of course, Sergeant. Thanks for calling."

As she hung up, the screen door opened and closed. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw a young man in his early twenties prowling toward her. He was of average height and weight, had brown hair and brown eyes of a lighter shade than John Brown's, and otherwise didn't resemble the late hired hand in the slightest. He wore blue denim trousers, a blue flannel shirt and his denim jacket had stenciled on it: *State Hospital, Railville*.

His face was distorted in an expression of maniacal rage and he was carrying the bloody axe from the barn.



KING of the KENNEL

by
**JOHN
LUTZ**

He was a modern Fagin, his "Olivers" ruthless killers. But killers never forget their trade!

WITH HIS EYES still focused on the girl on the other side of the restaurant, Alex Goodnight watched the waiter approach, a mere shadow figure in the corner of his vision.

At precisely the right moment he turned and addressed the waiter. "Just coffee, please. Black."

Alex's voice was slightly but not very noticeably slurred. He sensed rather than saw the waiter nod and

leave. Again Alex focused his attention on the girl, and again the gold ball point pen between his large fingers moved occasionally with surprising speed and deftness. The small notebook before him on the table, inconspicuous behind the sugar container and salt and pepper shakers, was a maze of shorthand.

The girl looked up for a moment and caught his gaze and he

moved his eyes away casually, waiting a full half minute before daring to look again. When he looked back she was no longer interested in him, but was still talking animatedly to the man across the table from her.

Alex's sad but alert blue eyes watched her. She had well formed and mobile red lips across even teeth, rather pretty lips, easy lips for a deaf man to read. He watched the slight stretching motion of the e's, the rounded, almost pouting o's and the delicate touch of her tongue on the tips of her even teeth for the th's.

Whenever she said something that might be of interest, or mentioned one of the names Alex had been told to watch for, his gold pen moved idly but with nimble speed across the note paper.

The waiter arrived with the coffee, and Alex's fingers flipped the page of the notebook to reveal harmless looking business notes. The waiter left, the page was flipped back and Alex nonchalantly sipped his coffee from the cup in his left hand.

The girl looked up and noticed him again. She looked away quickly, placing widely spread fingers in her short blonde hair in an unconscious gesture of distress.

"Don't turn now," Alex watched her say, "but do you know the man at the table by the window?"

Alex didn't give the man a chance to turn and look. He

glanced at his watch, gulped the last of his coffee and stood. Without looking back, he placed the money for his bill on the table and walked out of the restaurant.

As soon as he entered his fourth floor efficiency apartment Alex removed his shoes and lay down on the bed. Lying on his back, he lifted his legs one at a time and peeled off his socks. He rested there for about ten minutes before rising.

Alex was still barefooted as he walked to the refrigerator, got out a frozen dinner and put it in the oven. Going without shoes and socks when indoors was a habit he'd acquired long ago.

As he walked about the apartment, feeling the cool tile of the kitchen floor, the softness and contrasting hardness of where the living room rug met the hardwood floor, he felt all the subtle vibrations of the tenant-crowded building below him. Perhaps it made him a little less lonely.

While waiting for the dinner to heat, Alex opened the case of his portable typewriter and sat down to transfer the shorthand in his notebook to conventional English. He typed smoothly, with the speed and accuracy of a professional.

After dinner he watched part of a baseball game on television; then he went for a long walk, came home and went to bed.

Early the next morning Alex was driving his small car up the wind-

ing dirt roads that led into the hills above the city. He turned off onto a narrow white chat road and followed it until it became too narrow even for his small car.

Alex twisted the ignition key, feeling the engine stop, then he walked the remaining hundred or so yards to the gate in a high chain link fence.

As he approached the gate he could see the roof of the expensive but secluded house built into the hillside among the trees. When he wasn't traveling, this was where Walther lived.

When Alex was within ten feet of the fence Walther's companions and servants, three large black German Shepherds, ran and hurled themselves against the chain link gate.

They backed off, barking loudly, and with teeth bared hurled themselves again and again.

A tingling sensation ran through Alex's head as somewhere a high frequency whistle was blown. Immediately the dogs became calm, and in unison they turned and trotted off toward the house. Alex waited patiently, and in a few minutes he felt the second tingling sensation that was his signal to enter.

Alex walked up the driveway to the low brick house and entered a side door. For the first time in his life he felt a twinge of apprehension at what his orders would probably be, an apprehension he didn't understand. He walked down a hall

and through an open door that led into Walther's office.

Walther was sitting behind his marble-top desk, methodically spelling out words with a tape gun. He had a fondness for labeling things, and Alex had seldom seen him behind the marble desk top when he wasn't turning the alphabet dial and squeezing the plastic trigger to indent the adhesive metal tape with classifications for file folders, personal or business possessions.

Walther finished the word he was working on, looked at the tape with satisfaction and squeezed the separate trigger that snipped it off. The tape fell face up on the desk, but Alex was too far away to read it.

"About the Joyce Chambers woman," Alex said in his slightly slurred voice as he laid his typewritten report on Walther's desk.

Walther nodded and smiled. He was a thin man, with even, angular features and a small but sparkling diamond ring on his little finger. He read through the pages swiftly while Alex waited, then he set the papers on a corner of the desk and looked up at Alex.

"Make yourself a drink," he said silently, pointing toward a small corner bar, and he watched as Alex did so.

Alex was one of several employees in Walther's small but unique and profitable 'contracting' business. Like his fellow employees

he had been adopted from an orphanage for handicapped children when he was very young, and an old German couple who was in the pay of Walther had raised him. And since Walther paid well, they had raised him to Walther's specifications.

Alex had been tutored to get along in the world as unobtrusively as possible. At the same time he'd been taught to place very little value on any kind of life, human life in particular. He had begun by killing dogs and rabbits by hand when he was nine. His job was still to kill with his hands, but no longer dogs and rabbits.

But the main thing that had been drilled into Alex's head since childhood was the thing that held Walther's operation together—loyalty, complete and unquestioning. All Walther's employees had that in common, from Alex Goodnight to the blind man in London who could study the Braille blueprint of a building and find his way unerringly through darkness to a safe, then open it with the delicate touch of his fingers.

But the deaf ones, like Alex, with their one useless sense and their overdeveloped four others, must be the most loyal of all, for they were the most dangerous.

One of the prerequisites for Walther's employees was intelligence, and because of this intelligence they sometimes began to question, to wonder why. Usually by that

time they were too deeply embroiled in what they were doing to protest too much, even to themselves. But at this crisis some of them did balk, and their loyalty could not be taken for granted.

When this happened there was no alternative but to destroy them. A million-dollar operation could not be jeopardized. Of course the one trouble with that drastic precaution was that able replacements were very rare. It was, Walther often mused, an age of specialization.

Alex had finished mixing his diluted Scotch and water, the only thing he drank, and returned to sit before Walther's desk. Walther began to spell out something on the tape gun again, and he had his head bowed so that Alex had to watch closely to read his lips.

"You will have to kill the Chambers woman," Walther said, twisting the alphabet dial. "Get her alone. Do it simply and quickly, as with the man in New York."

"Yes, sir," Alex said almost by reflex.

Walther looked up and smiled rather broadly. "When you're through with this one I think you'll deserve a nice vacation, say in Miami Beach."

Alex nodded. "That would be very good."

"Fine," Walther said. "I'll watch the newspapers and contact you when it's done." He turned his attention back to the tape gun and Alex stood and walked out of the

office and back down the short hall. He knew that Walther had the dogs roaming the grounds only during night interviews.

As Alex neared the high gate he could feel Walther's eyes on him through high powered binoculars. Once before he had gotten this feeling and turned to see the glint of sunlight off the lenses behind a window, and the next time he'd visited the office Walther had purposely laid the binoculars with the personalized red name tape label out where he could see them.

Latching the gate after him, Alex caught a glimpse of the dogs up near the house, running toward him through the sparse trees. He walked toward his car, his shoes crunching evenly on the small white stones, and he didn't hear or bother to turn when the dogs hit the chain link fence behind him.

Alex was waiting the next evening when Joyce Chambers came home from work. From his small car across the street he watched her enter her apartment building and saw the light come on inside the third floor window. She'd taken off her thin, stylish coat, and her slim figure was silhouetted for a moment as she walked to the window and pulled the drapes closed. Alex waited patiently.

Two hours later she came out of the building, walking sprightly in a bright yellow dress through the near-arch formed by the large, untrimmed hedges on either side of



the door. She got in her car and drove off quickly. As soon as she'd turned the corner, half a block up, Alex's car made a precision U-turn and followed.

She met the man again. This time at a tavern with outside tables gathered around a small colored fountain. Amber light played over her blonde hair as she sat with the man and they ordered their drinks. Alex didn't bother to watch them this time. Instead he went inside the tavern and sat in a booth near the window so he could keep an eye on her car. He knew that the man never drove to their appointments.

Joyce Chambers didn't leave with the man. Instead she walked across the street and got in her car alone. She walked slowly this time, thoughtfully.

Alex paid for his drink and left. He followed her for a while, until it became obvious to him by her aimless direction that she was driving with no destination. She didn't seem

to be checking her rear-view mirror, Alex noted. Of course there was the possibility that she knew she was being followed, or perhaps she was simply driving idly while she thought.

Walther had said to do the job quickly, and it was getting late. There would be little chance to get her alone this way, Alex thought, so he turned his car abruptly and drove back toward her apartment. The entrance vestibule was fairly well concealed from outside by shrubbery and the light was dim. Even if she made some noise he could escape easily without anyone seeing his face. He decided to wait for her there.

She was waiting for him.

As he entered her pale hand touched his arm lightly.

"Please, I want to talk to you—"

He read her lips with difficulty in the dim light.

He stared down at her. There was a softness about her features, a pitiable desperation in her large brown eyes. Alex's mind raced. "I don't believe I know you, Miss," he said.

The desperation in her eyes shone. "But you do! You've been following me for days!" She looked at him carefully, realizing then, perhaps, that there was something different about him.

His faintly slurred, monotone voice spoke again. "Why would I follow you?"

She knew then. He could tell by

the exaggerated enunciation when she spoke, angling her head slightly upward so he could see her lips. "Please don't play games. I only want to talk to you."

He stood thinking for a moment. "Where?"

Joyce Chambers looked around automatically. Even through her desperation there was a touch of self-consciousness. "Upstairs. In my apartment."

It might be better there, Alex thought. Easier, more private, and perhaps it would be a while before the body was found.

He nodded.

She led the way. He watched the liquid, rhythmic motion of her hips beneath the yellow dress as she took the stairs.

Her apartment was small, tastefully furnished, but with a worn, slightly threadbare atmosphere. Furniture that was just entering the last days of its usefulness. Joyce Chambers sat down on the sofa, but Alex remained standing.

Her frightened eyes, which fascinated Alex, grew larger. "I want to appeal to you—to them—for mercy."

Alex felt a twinge of pity. She wouldn't believe him if he told her that he was merely doing his job, that he neither knew nor cared who 'they' were.

"I didn't mean to hurt anyone," she continued in a rush of words that Alex could hardly understand. "It started as a silly adventure, a

harmless thrill, and then I got in deeper and deeper!"

Alex checked to make sure the drapes were still closed and sat down next to her.

"I'll promise to never talk, to go away—" she was saying, as Alex turned his body to face her on the sagging sofa. Tears glistened on her cheeks as she placed her small hands against his chest, her fingers clawing into the material of his jacket. "I'll do anything! Anything!"

Alex felt a fondness stirring in him, a fondness turning to desire, but a strangely protective desire. He told himself that he would not do this, would not snuff out the light in those beautiful eyes, but the silent voice in the back of his mind gripped his will like iron. Independent of him, his huge hands, his strong hands, rose like separate creatures to her throat and did their usual efficient job. The gouging tips of his thumbs felt no vibrations of a scream.

When it was over, Alex Goodnight bowed his head.

A week, an almost sleepless week after Joyce Chambers' death, Walther contacted Alex with a typewritten, coded letter, and at one the next morning, as a precaution against being seen at Walther's so soon after the murder, Alex was again driving his small car up into the hills beyond the city.

He went through the ritual of the

dogs and found Walther behind his desk as usual, idly punching out letters on the tape gun by the shaded light of a desk lamp. Alex got his drink, took his chair in front of Walther's wide desk.

"You did a very good job," Walther said, concentrating on his tape.

Alex sat silently, and after punching out a few more letters Walther raised his eyes curiously.

"I didn't want to kill this one," Alex said slowly.

Walther's eyes narrowed with surprise and a certain wariness, as if one of his dogs had unaccountably growled at him.

"Well," he said smiling, "a few weeks of fun will make you forget it."

"I want to quit."

"Quit?" Walther's voice was amused and incredulous. "But you simply don't quit." He shrugged his shoulders as if Alex had suggested defying some irrefutable law of the universe. "You simply don't."

"I don't even want the money for this job," Alex said, "or the vacation."

"I see." Walther looked at Alex for a long time, coolly, appraisingly, a bit sadly. "Would you like to think about it for a while? Let me know later?"

Alex shook his head. "I've already thought. I'm sorry."

Walther sat stiffly, soberly.

"Well," he said at last, with smiling resignation, "perhaps I shouldn't try to talk you out of it."

There was something strange, Alex noted instinctively, about the way Walther was holding the tape gun, the way his finger had slid up the plastic punch trigger, the way he was—*aiming it!* In an instant Alex saw the perforated circle on the plastic front of the gun, exactly the size of a small caliber bullet. Something in his mind flashed an instantaneous message, and without sound or warning Alex sprang.

Alex felt two bullets slice into his body as he crossed the wide desk and his huge hand circled Walther's throat. He felt two more bullets enter as they sprawled struggling to the floor and he took into Walther's panic-stricken eyes. One of Alex's hands left Walther's throat for a split second, slapped the gun away, and then darted back to its previous position. Alex dug in with his thumbs.

Walther's face became splotched with red, then the red merged with a mottled blue.

And that's when Alex's fingers began to lose their grip. He was

bleeding terribly, weakening toward death, and the growing pain in his stomach and chest kept him from tensing and exerting all his power. He saw the glint of sudden hope, of animal cunning, in Walther's eyes as he realized what was happening. Slender fingers clamped Alex's wrists, waiting for the moment when they could push his hands away. Slowly the bluish color left Walther's complexion.

The fingers about Walther's neck were trembling now, losing control. Mustering his remaining strength Alex forced himself to rise to his knees.

Walther lay looking up at him, waiting, watching clinically, almost smiling.

Alex screamed something unintelligible, something scarcely human down at Walther. Then he lunged forward, downward, and with all the viciousness of his death agony sank his teeth deep into Walther's pink throat.

Outside, the dogs were patrolling the grounds.

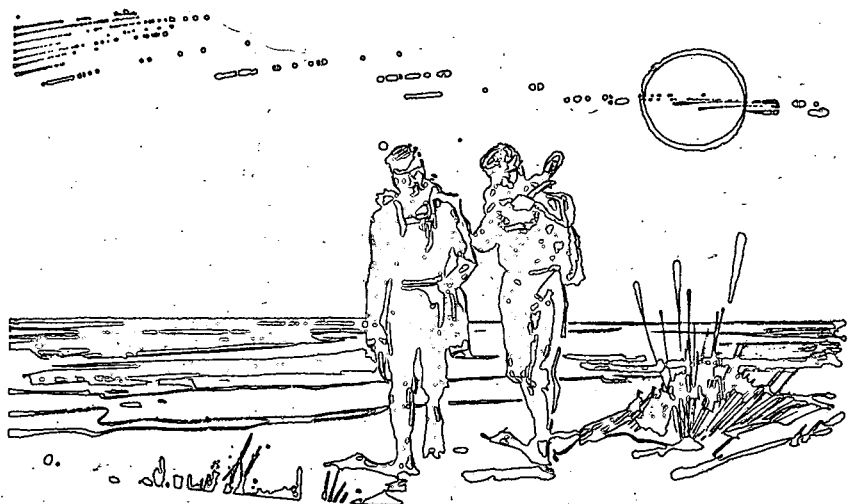
In the Next Issue:

Another TRUE CRIME STORY Masterpiece

VIRGINIA HILL: UNDERWORLD ENIGMA

by DAVID MAZROFF

Booze and broads and barbershop chords—these were gangdom's playthings. And of them all, none could equal curvy, man-loving Virginia Hill, who took her gunsels where she found them and left them happy—those that still were alive . . .



NIGHT GAMES

They had perfect alibis. Their papers, their past were clean. They couldn't have stolen the governor's jewels. "Put 'em up," I told them. "You're under arrest!"

by ED LACY

I WON'T ADMIT it's my age. I've always enjoyed sleeping. My dear and departed wife claimed I snoozed during our wedding ceremony. One reason I took on the job of police commissioner here was, no matter how hot the day, at night a cool breeze from the Caribbean blows through my cottage window, making for solid shut-eye. Ambilla isn't much of anything,

even as an island. It's thirty-nine square miles of coral rock, population 1538 poor black folks. The best way of reaching our island is via a four-seater plane which makes a daily flight with the mail from Antigua, or by ancient island schooners, which is traveling the hard way.

We raise some coconuts, export a little fish and salt. With the av-

erage income about \$900 a year, I can understand why my folks left here when I was five years old. But my U.S. pension goes a long way on Ambilla.

Last year, when Ambilla celebrated its independence, I came down on a tour, having just retired from the Chicago police force. When the stuffy British police commissioner left, to return to London, I took over the four-man police force.

Everybody on the island was excited about independence and I suppose I got a touch of the fever myself. There's big talk of building a posh hotel to lure the tourists, a fish cannery and an oil company has promised to start drilling around the island.

Of course none of these things have materialized yet, but I like the fresh air of eagerness that tops the slow, easy-going, island living. And the job is a snap. Outside of a few drunks, we have little crime.

So I was startled and angry when this pounding on my door got me out of a good sleep at midnight. I opened my door and Sergeant Simms gave me a snappy salute as he said, "Sir! The governor's mansion has been robbed! The crown jewels are gone!"

Now the governor's house should be burglar proof. It's now both a museum and the home of the first elected native governor, his wife and maid. Many years before, a big coconut planter, Sir

Farrel Houston, had presented the island with a replica of the royal crown, studded with real jewels, to honor the first visit by the king, who was touring other West Indian islands. The British crown governor had installed an electrified fence around the entrance.

The mansion is the finest and largest house in the island, with well kept lawns and a veranda in the rear facing a small cove, which in turn is surrounded by a circular reef, making it impossible for even a rowboat to cross it.

Coming awake fast as I slipped into my fancy uniform, I asked Simms, "Any of the fishing boats left the harbor?"

"Sir! I have turned out the entire force. We are checking on that."

As Ambilla is small, with one harbor, it's comparatively easy to check on the going and coming of people. "Is the governor sure he set the electric fence alarm, Sims?"

"Sir! He is positive. He did it himself. The governor and Mrs. Harris retired at nine-thirty as did the servant girl. Along about ten-thirty Governor Harris was awakened by a noise in the museum wing. At first he thought nothing of it, then decided to check. Nothing was taken except the crown. We found that on the lawn, but all the precious gems had been removed."

"Okay. Let's go to Mrs. Moorepark's guest house."

Sargeant Simms' dark face was puzzled as he drove me there in the island's one Land Rover. It's also our only police car. Finally he asked, "Sir! You suspect the two American men who came in yesterday morning?"

"I want to check on them."

Mostly because there's so little else to do, I make a point of greeting the daily plane. Yesterday four visitors had arrived: an elderly couple, tourists, island-hopping, and two young fellows here for fishing and scuba diving, Jesse Williams and Felton Davis.

After twenty-eight years on the Chicago police force you get a kind of second sense about punks. I had such a feeling about these two yesterday but their papers were in order and, as I said, we are making a play for tourist money.

Ambilla's sole town is cleverly called The Harbor because its few stores and many shacks are sprawled around the island's one harbor. We have two guest houses, one on top of the slight hill at the end of the harbor, where the old tourist couple had gone and Mrs. Moorepark's ten room stone house right on the water.

The house was completely dark when we reached there, of course, but Mrs. Moorepark's room is back of the desk at the entrance and on the second knock with my walking stick, she opened the door. A plump, old woman with a shrill voice, dark face in contrast



to the frilly white robe she was wearing.

Blinking, she asked, "Sir. Is something wrong?" as she turned on her dim hall light.

That's another thing I like about my job. I'm 'Sir' to everybody. Okay, it's silly, but I eat it up; perhaps because I can recall all the other names I've been called in Chicago. Tipping my cap, I told her, "I don't know. There's been a robbery; the royal crown was taken."

"God save us," she whispered.

"Those two American men who came here yesterday, have they been in all night?"

"Ah, those two rascals! I shall be glad when they depart Monday morning. They had the gall to try to bring a woman to their room! In my house, bringing in a harlot!"

"Who was that?"

"Camelia, that hussy," the old lady said scornfully. "I told them and her a thing or two, ordered her out."

"I'm sure you did. About what time was that, Mrs. Moorepark?"

"Oh, about an hour ago. Up she comes, bold as brass and knocks

on my front door, says she wants to see the two Yanks and which is their room? I told her women are not allowed in my rooms, unless they are regular guests. Well, you know what a big mouth Camelia has. There was a fuss, but she didn't get in. The two men were pretty angry about it, too. But I do have my good name to think of, you know."

Virtue on our island has always been an easy-going deal and because we are a small island, everybody knows his neighbor's private life. Gossip was the reason a newspaper never could make it on Ambilla. Camelia wasn't really a professional, merely a brash woman one of the fishermen had recently brought over from St. Kitts.

"Mrs. Moorepark, are you certain the two men didn't leave the house tonight?"

"Positive, Sir. After supper they retired to their room. They had been swimming most of the day and were tired. They have the back room on the veranda, facing the sea. I sat at my desk, listening to the BBC news on my radio, from St. Johns. At nine I went to bed, as I always do.

"But I am a light sleeper, heard Camelia's bare feet on my steps before she even knocked on the door. I would have heard anybody walking in the hall, opening the door, the hinges are in need of oil and—Good Lord! Sir, you suspect them? Thieves in *my* house!"

"I'm merely checking on strangers. Couldn't they have jumped down from the veranda, walked around the house?" I asked, thinking that really didn't matter; it would have been impossible to have climbed the gate to the mansion, if the electric alarm had been on.

"If they ruined my flower bed, I shall make them pay! But I sleep so lightly I hear dogs in my flowers. I would have heard—"

There was a noise outside and officer Bruce Taylor, very neat in his smart black and white uniform, came cycling up the driveway. Giving me a sharp salute, he said; "Sir! Not a boat has left the harbor."

"Good, then the jewels are still on Ambilla. Wait outside and don't let anybody leave here, Taylor." Turning to the old lady I said, "Mrs. Moorepark, kindly show me to their room."

It was a fine room for sleeping, opening on the back veranda and at high tide the water practically up to the concrete floor. At my knock, Jesse Williams, the bigger of the two, opened the door, gave me a sleepy look. Wearing only shorts, he was a lean and muscular type, maybe thirty years old.

"Yeah?" he asked, yawning.

"I'm the police commissioner. I'd like you to account for your movements since you landed on Ambilla, Mr. Williams."

He ran his eyes over my uniform

as if about to say I looked like a doorman. "That's easy, old man. Ain't much to do here. We—"

"Who the hell is it, Jesse?" a man asked from the other twin bed.

"The local fuzz."

Felton Davis came to the door, also in shorts, a mild sunburn making him look like a pink rat with his sharp face and shaggy dark hair.

"What's this all about, officer?" he asked.

"Pops wants us to account for our time since we been here," Williams said.

"In the middle of the night? You got no right to ask us anything. We're American citizens, here as tourists."

Jesse Williams put a large hand on Felton Davis' shoulder, told me, "It's okay, officer. I don't know what this is all about, but we're always willing to play ball with the law. Let me see. Our plane put down around eleven didn't it, Felton?"

"Aha. It was before noon. We're scuba men. Picked this house because it's on the beach."

"Right," Jesse went on. "We unpacked and had lunch. Then we spent the afternoon swimming."

"Up 'till five," Davis added. "You remember, Mrs. Moore, we—"

"Mrs. Moorepark," the old lady cut in, her shrill voice stiff.

"Okay, okay. You remember,

Mrs. Moorepark, we asked you if there was a gas station or garage in town? Well, we found the garage and refilled our tanks with air, stopped for a few drinks. We met this dame in the bar, who asked if we were interested in a little action. Then, we came back here and ate supper, sat around for about an hour or so, hit the sack at—About nine, wasn't it, Jesse?"

"About then. We were bushed, real beat."

"You didn't leave the house at all tonight?" I asked.

"Didn't even leave our bed, except when the broad came around and started raising hell. We awoke and—"

"I'll have no swearing in my house!" Mrs. Moorepark cut in again.

"Sorry," Williams said with a mock grin. "Anyway, they was shouting so much in the hallway, we awoke. We'd forgotten all about the dame. I got her aside, gave her a buck and told her to beat it. Then we went back to sleep. What's happened, officer?"

"There's been a robbery," I said.

William's hard eyes narrowed. "Yeah? So why blame us, pops?"

"Cut the pops stuff," I said softly. "I dislike coincidences. It's odd that you two come here and we have the first major crime in the seven months I've been police commissioner."

"That don't make sense. Also it's an insult, officer. We're tour-

ists, on vacation. Hel . . . Heck, I visited Ambilla about ten months ago. That's how I knew about the good spear fishing. You have a robbery ten months ago?"

"No."

"You see," this Jesse Williams said with a big grin, like he had proved something. "What about the old biddy and her husband on the plane with us? Maybe they took whatever you're missing?"

"I intend to check on them. I'd like to search your room."

"Go right ahead, officer."

The shorter one, this Felton Davis, who had been busy scratching his belly, said, "Wait a fat second. You got a warrant?"

"Come on, Felton," his buddy said, "let him search our room so we can get back to sleep. Come in, officer."

Williams stepped aside, but Davis scowled and told me, "I don't like being pushed around, called a crook. I don't know the law here, but if you ain't got a search warrant, why—"

"Felton, stop it," Williams said, sort of shoving him away from the door. "No sense standing here gabbing all night. Let the cop look so we can get our rest. I want to get in a lot of spear fishing tomorrow. Come in, officer."

There wasn't much in the room: two beds, a dresser, table, closet and a chair. They each had a small suitcase and piled in one corner of the room was their scuba tanks,

face masks, fins, rubber suits and snorkels.

Sergeant Simms went through their bags and the closet while I examined the beds, the dresser, the curtained window. The jewels from the crown would only make a small package.

Felton Davis leaned against one wall, red face sullen. Jesse Williams helped me pull the beds apart, a smile on his rather handsome face. Finally I poked among the scuba stuff with my walking stick.

"Take it easy, officer," Williams said. "Don't scratch our face masks."

Putting my stick on the table, I got Simms's eye. Stepping over to Felton Davis, I spun him around, had cuffs on him before he knew what was happening. Sergeant Simms threw his gun on Jesse Williams and Mrs. Moorepark screamed.

I took Simms's cuffs and put them on Williams, told Simms and Taylor to walk the two goons to our police station. They were both yelling about their alibi, that they'd never left the house all night.

I drove the Land Rover to the shack where Camelia was staying. She acted like a wildcat but it didn't take me long to find the gems. I took her to our old station house.

Jesse Williams was yelling from a cell that he wanted to see the U.S. Consulate, spouted that he knew his rights and we couldn't

hold an American citizen. I think he even screamed about writing the UN.

I left my desk, where I was making my report, to tell him, "Knock it off, punk. The nearest U.S. official is in St. Johns, Antigua. I'll notify him of your arrest in the morning."

"Arrest? You can't hold us!" Felton Davis screamed. "You heard the old lady say we never left her crummy house!"

"Cut the act. It's over. You left the house all right, only not on foot. You two jumped off the back veranda, swam the half a mile to the governor's mansion, came in over the reef. Taking the jewels, you swam back to the guest house. The whole caper was arranged with Camelia, probably in St. Kitts, which was why she came here. Big boy saw the jewels when he first visited our island and—"

"You're making a fool of yourself, pops. You've no proof of all that!" Williams snarled. "The fact you found the stones on the dame has nothing to do with us!"

I sighed. "Jerks are the same the world over, always making dumb mistakes. You're first error was in treating me like a hick cop. I was walking a tough Chicago beat about the time you were born. As for proof, you gave it to me in your own words."

"We never said we took a

damned thing!" Williams snapped.

"But you told me you refilled your air tanks late in the afternoon, had a few drinks and returned to the guest house for supper. Then you allegedly went to bed. But I noticed both your tank dials *registered less than one-quarter full*. How did you use up all that air, skin-diving in your sleep? You used it swimming to and from the governor's house!"

"That ain't no stand-up proof," Jesse Williams whispered. "So maybe we had a leak in the tanks."

"I told you I don't buy coincidences, like the possibility of a leak in both your tanks. Another error—punks always have to talk big. Camelia's cell is down the hall here, she couldn't help but hearing you trying to shift the whole deal on her just now. She'll talk for sure. You jerks are going to spend more than a weekend in the Caribbean. You'll probably be here from five to ten years."

It was five A.M. when I had Camelia's confession and returned to my cottage. Dawn was starting to crack the horizon, but I figured I could still pound my ear for a few hours.

Not that I minded losing my sleep this time.

As I quickly undressed, hung up my nice uniform, I couldn't help thinking it had been a good night's work for an old cop.

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WEARING OF THE GREEN

by JACK RITCHIE

They had many things in common, these two. Unfaithful wives, debts beyond hope of paying, hatreds beyond belief. The kind of hatreds that only complete flight could cure. Or maybe a little bit of murder.



I RAISED AN eyebrow when Harold Winster said, "I would like to disappear."

He nodded. "So I decided to consult an expert. I mean that, as a detective, you must regularly find people who drop out of sight and therefor it appears reasonable to me that you also ought to know how to go about making them disappear. And beyond recall. I have no desire at all ever to be found again."

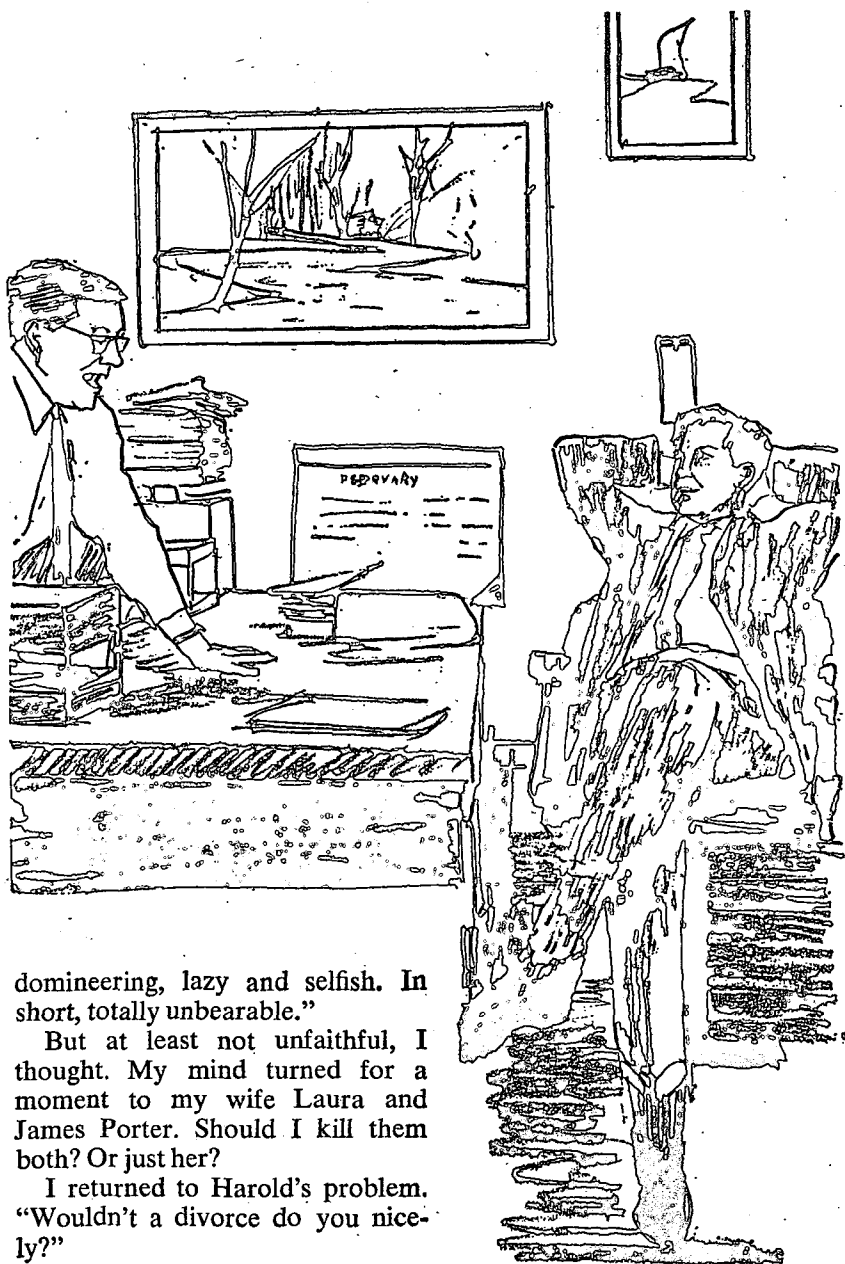
"Why do you want to disappear?"

He fielded the question. "Just why do people intentionally vanish?"

I shrugged. "Because they stole something, can't stand their wives, are head-over-heels in debt, and, of course, miscellaneous."

Harold Winster was a slope-shouldered man who appeared to have endured much.

"It's my wife," he said. "She's



domineering, lazy and selfish. In short, totally unbearable."

But at least not unfaithful, I thought. My mind turned for a moment to my wife Laura and James Porter. Should I kill them both? Or just her?

I returned to Harold's problem. "Wouldn't a divorce do you nicely?"

"I've talked to my wife on that point and she has promised to cause all the trouble possible if I try to get one. And believe me, she can cause trouble. No, I think the safest thing to do is for me simply to disappear."

I studied him for a few moments. "What makes you think that I would help you to run away from your wife? Doesn't that strike you as being unethical?"

He smiled faintly. "Mr. Carson, I have seen your name mentioned in the newspapers. Never favorably. Unless you are a completely misjudged man, one gets the impression that ethical practice is not your strong point."

Winster, of course, was under the impression that he was speaking to Charles Carson, whose name was lettered on the door.

My name is also Carson. Edward Carson. Charles Carson was my uncle.

This day had really begun with the telephone call to my apartment at ten that morning.

"Are you Edward Paul Carson?" the voice had asked.

"Yes," I said. "Who is this?"

"My name is Villars. I'm calling for the Memorial Hospital. Are you related to or acquainted with a Charles Frederick Carson?"

"Yes. He's my uncle. What's happened?"

"I'm afraid that he's passed away. Heart attack. Your name was among those in his wallet and

since your surnames were identical, I thought I'd try you first. Was he married?"

"No," I said. "I'm his only living relative."

I had been somewhat saddened by the news, but no more than that. Uncle Charley and I had not been particularly close and I knew very little concrete about him except that he made his living as a private detective.

I remembered him as portly, florid, and effusive. He had acquired the habit of expensive clothes and wore a huge diamond ring.

Villars cleared his throat and continued. "We'd like you to come down here, if you would. To positively identify the body, you know, and make the arrangements."

"Of course," I said. "I'll be there in half an hour."

Laura came into the room. "Who was that?"

"Memorial Hospital," I said. "My Uncle Charley died. I'll have to take care of things."

Laura had dark hair and cool eyes. "Is he the one with the big diamond ring?"

"The same."

It was my day off and I hadn't shaved yet. That accomplished, I went down to the apartment building garage.

At the hospital, I made certain that it was indeed Uncle Charley and then followed Villars to his office.

He appeared to serve the hospital in some kind of an administrative capacity.

"The death occurred at eighty-three this morning. Apparently he was having breakfast in some diner." He checked the address. "Seven-sixteen East Mason."

After a moment, the number registered with me. "He had his office in the building."

I rubbed my neck. "This matter of arranging things. I've never done anything like that before."

"Simply select a funeral director. He will take care of most things. But of course you will have to see to the other less immediate items. Settling his estate and things like that."

I selected a funeral director at random from the telephone book. After placing the matter in his hands, I went back to my car.

What was I supposed to do now? Inform his friends? I hadn't the faintest notion of who any of them might be.

I would certainly have to see his landlord and also take care of closing his office.

716 East Mason was not far away and I stopped there first.

It was a five-story building in the older section of the city and the street floor was occupied by a variety of commercial establishments, including a drugstore, a diner, a shoe store, and a discount house.

I was conscious of hunger and

also curiosity. I entered the diner and ordered coffee and a sandwich.

I was the only customer at the moment and the proprietor soon proceeded to detail the excitement of the morning.

"He was a private eye," he said. "Used to eat here a lot. Name was Charley Carson."

"I know," I said. "He was my uncle."

He seemed surprised, as though my being there could be classified as a coincidence. "Well, what do you know." He went to the hat rack and brought back a tan top coat and a hat. "Charley left his coat and hat here. I mean in all the excitement, I forgot to tell the ambulance people to take his stuff along." He hesitated. "You really his nephew?"

I showed him my driver's license and that seemed to satisfy him.

When I finished the sandwich, I picked up the hat and coat and left. A dozen feet to the right took me to the main entrance of the building and I entered a small dingy vestibule.

The wall directory informed me that Uncle Charley had an office on the third floor. I decided that I might as well go up there and tell his secretary, just in case she didn't know of his death yet.

When I tried the door to his office, I discovered that it was locked. Evidently his secretary al-

ready knew about Uncle Charley and had left.

I shifted Uncle Charley's top coat to my other arm and the jingling of keys got my attention. I investigated and brought out two key rings. One obviously held the keys to his car. Probably it was parked in the neighborhood. I would have to see about storing it or something.

The other ring contained some half a dozen or more keys and they were likely for his office and his apartment.

I hesitated briefly and then resorted to the ring of keys until I found one that operated the lock and opened the outer office door.

Charley's suite, if one could call it that, consisted of one small waiting room and an equally small office beyond. Both rooms were clean, but the smell of an aged building lingered.

The inner office furniture consisted of one desk, two chairs, and a three-drawer filing cabinet.

I found myself going through the drawers of the desk, but there was nothing of particular interest and I looked toward the filing cabinets.

As far as I knew, Uncle Charley made a living and that was just about all of it. And yet there was that large diamond ring and I did remember that Uncle Charley always drove a big new car.

I moved to the filing cabinet. As I expected, it was locked, but one

of Uncle Charley's keys eliminated that problem.

I paged through some of the manila folders. It appeared that Uncle Charley had had a varied and interesting clientele.

After a while I had closed the file drawers and had been sitting in Uncle Charley's chair mulling over the subject of Uncle Charley's income, when Harold Winster had rapped lightly on the glass-paned door that separated me from the waiting room.

I suppose I should have informed him immediately that I was not Charles Carson, but I had been curious about the kind of people who would come to Uncle Charley, and I thought that just listening for a few minutes might do no harm.

And then, of course, Harold Winster had given me a pleasant new idea.

"How long have you been married?" I now asked.

"Twelve years. I tried awfully hard to adjust, Mr. Carson. But it was impossible. For the last eight years I've been planning to leave her."

"Planning for eight years?" I asked him.

"Well, not exactly planning. Getting ready is more like it. You see, I wanted to arrange things first. Get the mortgage paid off, you know. And I'm leaving behind a fair-sized bank account, some bonds, and, of course, the

checking account. And also the car. It's this year's model."

"Just what in the world do you intend to take with you when you leave?"

"Only the clothes one suitcase will hold and two hundred dollars."

"That's noble of you," I said and we both knew I didn't mean it.

He flushed. "Not noble, of course. It's just that I have a very low guilt threshold about running away."

I moved Uncle Charley's ash tray a few inches to the right. "It seems a pity that you must abandon the house, the car, those bonds, and the checking and saving accounts to a woman who obviously doesn't deserve them. You did slave years and years to accumulate those things, didn't you?"

He sighed. "I even moonlighted."

I used a soft approach. "Have you ever considered—for a fleeting moment—of doing away with your wife?"

His eyes flickered. "How could you possibly suggest something as extreme as that? Besides, I could never get away with it."

"Some men do."

"I'd be the most logical suspect."

"Of course."

There was a silence.

"I'd need an absolutely airtight alibi," he said.



I nodded.

He leaned forward slightly. "You don't suppose that a person could hire somebody to do a thing like murder?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," I said.

He stared at me reproachfully and evidently felt that he had been led on.

I moved the ashtray to the left this time. "Have you ever considered trading murders?"

He frowned. "Trading murders? You mean like I murder your wife and you murder mine?"

"It's something to think about."

He thought about it and began to perspire slightly. "I think it's better if I just disappear."

"Of course," I said. I pulled some paper toward me and reached for the desk pen. "Your full name and address, please?"

He gave them to me. "I know that the actual disappearance is really simple. Just a matter of getting on a bus, or train, or plane and traveling to another part of

the country. Thousands of people do it every year. No, my real problem is in assuming a new identity. After all, I do not intend to become a hermit. And in this modern day and age, all sorts of papers and certificates seem to be necessary in order to prove that one exists."

I agreed and said, "Frankly, I've never helped anyone disappear before. I'll have to give it some study. Could you come back here Wednesday? Say about eleven?"

He nodded. "How much will this cost me?"

"I'm sure that we can come to some agreement that will satisfy the both of us."

His eyes seemed to search the office. "You don't happen to have a picture of her, do you?"

"A picture of whom?"

"Your wife."

"The frame was damaged," I said. "I'm having it repaired. Perhaps the job will be done by Wednesday."

When he was gone, I sat back in Uncle Charley's chair.

Laura had married me principally as a base of operations for something better. I had not, obviously, been aware of that at the beginning of our marriage.

The fact gradually dawned upon me when I noticed that Laura made a point of learning about the men we met at our social functions, with particular emphasis

upon their financial stature. Not that our social life existed on too high a level—I was, after all, just an accountant with the Bradley Construction Company—but here and there we did touch the higher circles.

As time passed, Laura became increasingly cool toward me and the situation progressed to unexplained absences and outright lies.

In short, the whole scene began to look very fishy indeed. Another man?

I considered first in going to Uncle Charley and asking him to investigate. However, further thought convinced me that it might be better to have someone neutral do the work.

The Wells Agency, Confidential Investigations, quickly confirmed the fact that Laura did indeed have an extra-curricular interest, and that being one James Wilson, a vice-president with Bradley Construction with a salary twice that of my own.

That was the key to Laura, I thought. Not really men, but money. Probably she could be true to that.

Naturally I had been furious when I learned about the affair. My first impulse had been to shoot both of them.

But as I thought about it more, I hesitated. It would be satisfying to give Laura and Wilson what they deserved, but on the other hand, how long would the accomplish-

ment of that keep me warm if I were arrested and sent to prison?

No, there was no need in being a fool. The murders of my wife and Wilson would have to be done skillfully and safely.

But how? That had been the problem.

The phone at my elbow rang and I picked it up.

"Charley?" the voice asked.

"I'm sorry," I said, "But Charley isn't here. Who is this?"

He was a bit cautious. "Who are you?"

"Charley's nephew."

He decided to trust me—to a limited extent, anyway. "Okay. This is Pinky Muller. When Charley comes in, tell him I called and have him phone back."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Muller, but I'm afraid that my uncle will not be in. Ever."

There was a pause. "What do you mean?"

"He died this morning. Heart attack."

He absorbed the information. "Gee, I'm sorry to hear that. I always thought of him as my best. . . ." He sighed. "Well, that's the way it goes. Here today and gone tomorrow. I'll watch the obituaries and send flowers."

When he hung up, I locked the office and drove to Uncle Charley's apartment building. I used one of his keys to unlock the door.

It was a one-room efficiency apartment. I opened the small re-



frigerator in the kitchenette. Uncle Charley had evidently done his eating out. It contained only one six-pack of beer with one can missing.

I sat down in the only arm chair and looked about the main room. Nothing much here.

My mind went to Uncle Charley's diamond ring. Probably it would go to me.

What would be the procedure? Probate or something like that? And how long would it take? Would I have to sell it in order to pay the inheritance taxes? searching the room, not quite sure of what I was looking for.

I found nothing.

I got out of the chair and began

Obviously Uncle Charley was not the type to hide money in his mattress. If he had money. And I hadn't found any bank book. Just a monthly statement concerning Charley's checking account. As of the previous month, he was worth \$273.86.

I reached into my pocket for a handkerchief and my fingers touched the key rings again. I brought them out.

That little one. A safety deposit box key?

I drove to the national bank in which Charley kept his checking account and signed the book with his name.

In the vault, I matched the key number to a box and opened it.

LAURA TRIED ON the new chin-chilla.

"If I doesn't fit," I said, "I'll take it back to the store."

"It fits," she said. "Where did you get the money?"

"Never mind about that," I said. "Let me do the worrying about finances."

"Like hell." She looked at me. "Have you been embezzling from the company?"

"No," I said. "Absolutely not. I swear it."

Her eyes narrowed. "Did your Uncle Charley leave you a bundle?"

I put the tissue paper back into the long box. "When Uncle Charley died, he had less than three

hundred dollars in his checking account."

"He didn't impress me as being that poor."

"Well, he did make some money, but he spent it as fast as it came in."

"What about that big diamond ring?"

"Made of glass," I said. "Or whatever they make imitations out of these days."

She was persistent. "Then where the devil did you get the money?"

"Laura," I said. "Sometimes it's better not to know too much. If you are ever questioned by the Internal Rev—" I closed the box. "I mean that the best way to keep out of trouble, if there should be trouble, is to know nothing."

She stared at me. "There's going to be trouble?"

"No," I said. "I'm positive there won't be. But still, I think it's better to be safe, don't you?"

After a while, she smiled faintly. "We'll have it your way. For now, at least."

Harold Winster kept his Wednesday appointment.

He scowled. "You're not Charles Carson. I read the obituaries."

"Charles Carson was my uncle," I said. "And I've taken over his business. I'm sorry I forgot to tell you. My name is Edward Carson."

He made the adjustment and looked about the office again. "I don't see her picture."

"The shop hasn't finished repairing the frame yet," I said.

Harold sighed. "Well, about my disappearance. Do we invent a name for me? And forge identification papers?"

"No," I said. "No forgeries. It's always better to be someone who actually exists, just in case someone wants to check. How old are you?"

"Thirty-eight."

"Now that we're going to give you a new identity," I said, "Would you like to be older or younger?"

He reflected a moment. "No. I think thirty-eight fits me just about right."

I took him to my car and we drove to the public library, where we consulted a newspaper for the year 1928. I turned to the birth announcements. "Choose a father," I said.

He studied the list. "I've always admired the Irish. Patrick Aloysius O'Brien seems rather nice. But we still don't know what my own name would be. It just says *Sons Born To* and gives no further information."

When the librarian brought the city directory for the year 1930 from the vault, we looked up Patrick Aloysius O'Brien and found that he resided at 136 W. Galena Street. As of that year, he was the father of eight children, the two-year-old being Michael Byrnes O'Brien.

Harold repeated the name.

"Michael Byrnes O'Brien. I rather like that. It sings."

I turned to the latest directory and found that Michael Byrnes O'Brien still lived in the city and was now himself the father of three girls. I copied down the address.

We went back to my car.

Harold was thoughtful as I drove. "I've been thinking about the car."

"Car? What car?"

"My car," Harold said. "Really the best one I've ever had. And it's free and clear."

"You'll have to leave it behind," I said. "It's registered in your name and so is the license. You could be traced through that."

He agreed, but sadly. "I guess you're right."

I passed what should have been 136 W. Galena Street. Now that space and the lots adjacent were occupied by a large supermarket. Here and there family houses still remained, but it was clear that things change and the area was converting to high-rise apartments.

I circled the neighborhood until I found the nearest Catholic Church. "First we'll get you a baptismal certificate. Tell the priest you lost the original."

Harold worried. "How do we know that Michael Byrnes O'Brien was Catholic?"

I looked at him for a moment and he flushed. "I guess that was a foolish question. But in order to get the baptismal certificate, won't

I have to prove that I'm Michael Byrnes O'Brien?"

"No," I said. "Your word will be enough. Priests don't expect people to lie to them."

Inside the rectory, a young parish priest consulted the baptismal records for the year 1928 to verify the baptism of one Michael Byrnes O'Brien and promptly filled out another baptismal certificate.

On the way out, Harold dropped five dollars in the poor box.

In the car, Harold sighed again. "It's a pity to leave the house to Flora. She never really took much interest in it."

"Forget the house," I said. "You can't take it with you." I looked at him curiously. "You're not thinking of calling this whole thing off, are you?"

"Good Heavens, no," he said firmly. "I couldn't stand that woman for another month. My leaving is the only solution."

"Of course," I said.

Downtown, we parked in a lot near the municipal building and went upstairs to the vital records department.

We approached one of the windows and Harold followed my previous instructions.

"I can't find my damn birth certificate anywhere," he complained. "What do I have to do to get a duplicate?"

"Just what you're doing now," the clerk said. "What's your name?"

"Michael Byrnes O'Brien," Harold said proudly. He gave the address of the bona fide Michael Byrnes O'Brien.

Harold watched the clerk fill out a form. "When you got three daughters running around the house," he said, "something's bound to get lost."

The clerk nodded absently. "Do you have any identification? Letters?"

"Well, no," Harold said. "But I did dig up my baptismal certificate. Will that do?"

The clerk glanced at the slip of paper.

Harold indicated me with a thumb. "Eddie here will vouch for me, won't you, Eddie? We've had desks side by side for fifteen years."

I glanced at my watch. "And we'll be fired side by side if we don't get back before one."

The clerk moved to the rear of his cubicle, consulted a city directory, and appeared satisfied. Five minutes later, Harold had his birth certificate.

We went down the hall into the offices of the motor vehicle department.

Harold approached another clerk. "My name is Michael Byrnes O'Brien. About two weeks ago my pocket was picked. I was hoping that whoever did it would at least have the decency to drop the empty wallet into a mail box, but that hasn't happened. I guess



I'll need a duplicate of my driver's license."

It was a familiar story to the clerk. He nodded routinely. "Did you bring your birth certificate?"

Our mission there accomplished, we walked toward the elevators.

"What about a social security card?" Harold asked. "Do I get a duplicate?"

"No," I said. "Open an account of your own wherever you decided to settle down."

"Won't the social security people want to know why I waited until I'm thirty-eight before applying?"

"I doubt it. But if they are, just tell them that you never had a so-

cial security card until now because you were living on an independent income. That's gone now and you're forced to go to work."

In our car again, Harold became thoughtful. Finally he said, "The first time we met, you mentioned something about—ah—trading murders?"

"Oh, that," I said. "Just a passing thought. Forget it." I started the car and pulled into traffic. "Basically, I think you are now equipped to disappear. When do you plan on leaving?"

He watched approaching traffic. "Well, in about four or five days. There are a few little things I still have to do and think over." He took a deep breath. "Frankly, I wouldn't mind it in the least if my wife died. Not in the least." He exhaled the air. "I'll see you again before I go. To pay up, you know."

"Let's make that a definite appointment," I said. "I'm not always in my office."

WE GOT INTO the big new car and I pulled away from the curb.

After a while Laura closed her eyes and seemed to bathe in the luxury of the ride.

"How did you like the necklace?" I asked.

"Beautiful."

"The asking price was seventeen thousand," I said.

She smiled.

"I wasn't sure if I should get you pearls instead."

The eyes opened and studied me. "I prefer diamonds."

On Lake Shore Drive I pulled to the side of the road and stopped.

"Anything wrong?" she asked.

"No." I pointed to the large Norman house behind the six-foot iron fence. "How do you like it?"

She stared at it for a few moments and then turned to me.

I smiled and started the engine again. I swung the car into the circular driveway and stopped in front of the main entrance.

"Who owns it?" she asked cautiously.

I took the ring of keys out of my pocket and dangled them in front of her eyes.

"Guess," I said.

After I brought Laura back to the old apartment to arrange for the packing, I went downstairs to the public phone booth and called the Wells Agency once again.

Two days later, Eugene Wells called me in to his office.

He put the tape recorder on his desk and bent down to plug the cord into the outlet. "They met at the Antlers Hotel, as usual."

We sat down and listened to the tape recording.

When it was finished, Wells said, "In the process of calling off the affair, she used rather forceful language, didn't she?"

I agreed. "You don't suppose they'll ever get back together again?"

"Impossible," Wells said. "Not

after the things she called him. And vice versa."

I recalled parts of the recording. "I gather she returned the pearls?"

Wells nodded. "Impetuous action, I'd say. Even though they were cultured, we know that Wilson paid almost five hundred dollars for them." He glanced at the written report. "After she left, Wilson stayed another twenty minutes. It seems that the string broke when she threw the pearls in his face. Took him that long to find all of them again."

HAROLD WINSTER sat down and sighed. "I just can't do it."

"Do what?"

"Kill a strange woman."

"No?"

"No," he said. "After I saw you last time, I looked up your address and went to have a preliminary look at your wife. I knocked on the door of your apartment and pretended to be selling encyclopedias."

"Well?"

"She wasn't interested in encyclopedias. I mean that when I saw her, right then and there I knew that I couldn't possibly kill anyone. I guess that includes my wife."

"But you're still going to leave her?"

"Yes. Murder isn't the only solution."

"Harold," I said. "You're still a sucker."

After he left, I locked up the office.

I stared at Uncle Charley's name on the frosted glass door.

No, Uncle Charley had left me nothing. His safety deposit box had contained only a few personal papers and the diamond ring was indeed an imitation. When Uncle Charley had earned money, it had gone fast, most of it to Pinky Muller, his bookie.

I went downstairs to my car and began driving.

Harold had said it. "Murder isn't the only solution." And he was right. In the meeting of our minds, I had learned from him. There are sweeter, safer, longer-lasting revenges.

I had had to cash my bonds to make all the down payments and

that was a loss, but I did not regret it.

Soon they would come to take back the diamonds, and the fur coat, and the car, and the clothes. Soon she would learn that I had not bought the house. I had rented it.

All these things had been hers—for a moment—and then they had been taken away.

I smiled.

Yes, Laura would remember me. Always.

I parked my car and got out.

The elderly priest who sat at the desk smoked a briar pipe.

I glanced at the slip of paper in the palm of my hand again.

"My name is Sean Egan O'Herlihy," I said. "I seem to have lost my baptismal certificate and would like to get a replacement."

Read . . . In the NOVEMBER issue . . . Exclusively Yours . . .

DEAL ME OUT OF THE MORGUE

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Wherever Mike Shayne goes, whatever his mission, danger and sudden death are at his side. Perhaps none of all his assignments, however, had the deadly challenge that faced him when he took on the case of the man who had no enemies—yet had been marked by gangdom for swift, certain murder.

THE RICHEST GIRL IN TOWN

by DEANE and DAVID HELLER

Eden Storm collected lovers as carefully as she collected jewels—and she had a lot of both. Now she lay dead in silken sheets, and one of three women was her killer. Which one?



EDEN STORM was in fact, fair game. Even her dearest friends loathed her devotedly. Eden Storm-watching was their favorite topic of conversation.

"Eden Storm is a peacock—in everything but beauty."

"Eden doesn't have to bother attracting men with good conversation. All that money does the talking for her."

"Eden's face is beautiful. But her figure is better. It must be all of twenty-five million dollars by now."

"Come on, girls," red-haired Fran McNeal spoke wearily. "That's the sourest grapes I've ever heard in my life. Eden's a twentieth-century Circe. She can

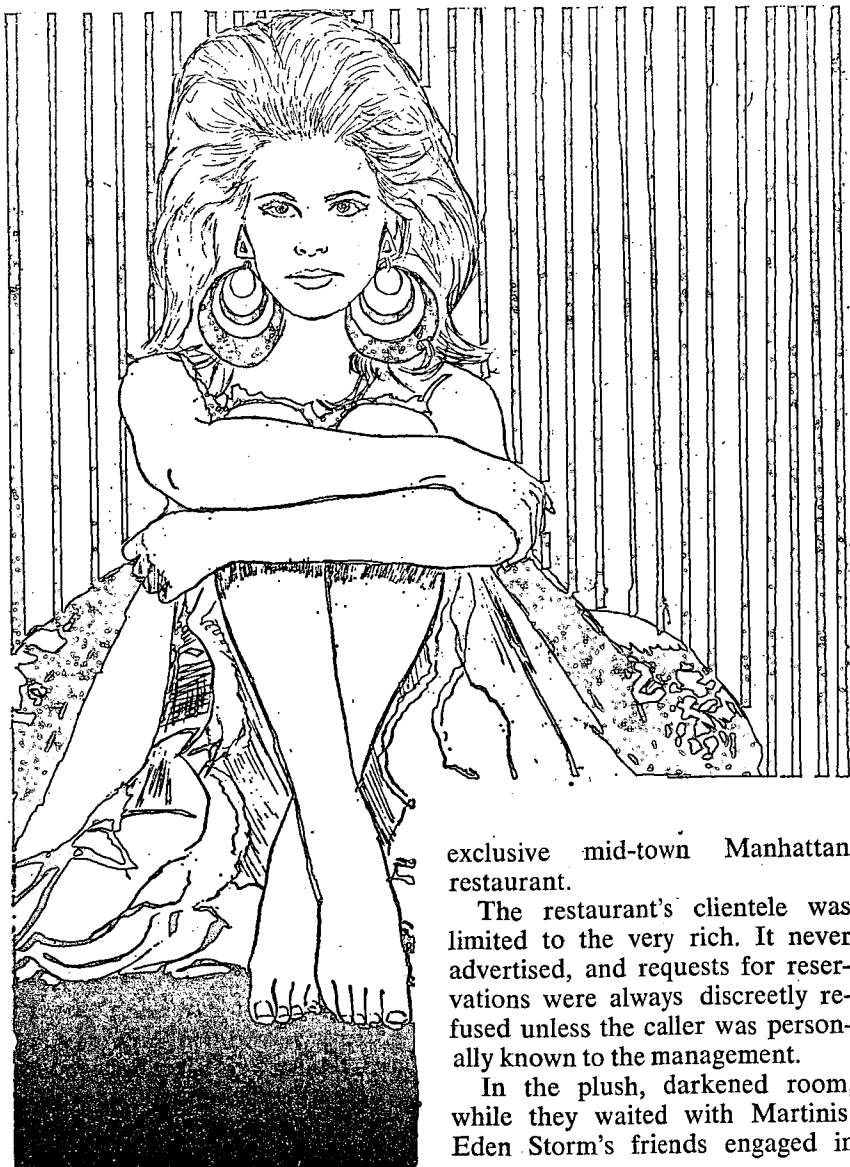
gaze soulfully at men with those limpid green eyes and turn them into swine. We all know that by this time."

"The men Eden picks," said Julie Stevens, "are already swine. Or potential swine."

"Not exactly all," said Rena Bradshaw drily. "Charley Webb certainly wasn't a swine. Nor Roger Whitworth."

"Women can see through Eden at a glance. Why are men such fools?"

It was true. Eden Storm was spoiled; selfish and outrageous. It was typical of Eden that she was already forty-five minutes late for their luncheon appointment at the glass-enclosed Tower Room of an



exclusive mid-town Manhattan restaurant.

The restaurant's clientele was limited to the very rich. It never advertised, and requests for reservations were always discreetly refused unless the caller was personally known to the management.

In the plush, darkened room, while they waited with Martinis, Eden Storm's friends engaged in

girl-talk on the all-absorbing *Topic Number One*—What made Eden different?

"It's all so unfair," Julie Stevens complained. "Eden started out somewhere in Texas as the richest girl in town and that was the low point of her career."

"It's maddening," Fran McNeal agreed. "In addition to having all that money and being such a celebrity, Eden doesn't even have to diet. That's really the last straw. Eden can eat anything she wants—just *anything*, rich deserts included, and she never gains an ounce."

A scarlet-jacketed waiter appeared at their table.

"I suppose we might as well have another Martini," Rena Bradshaw said. "We can't order until Eden gets here."

The three women who waited for Eden Storm had much in common. Each was in her mid-twenties, rich, socially-prominent, groomed to the teeth with the latest chic fashions. Each shared a morbid fascination with—and secret dread of—Eden Storm. Fran McNeal, red-haired and spirited, who had suddenly begun to wear the same scent of perfume that Eden wore; Julie Stevens, dark-haired and dark-eyed, whose designer copied Eden's creations; Rena Bradshaw, who imitated the exact shade of ash-blond hair that Eden affected.

It was Julie Stevens, sweet and

perhaps less sophisticated than Rena and Fran who advanced the novel argument that Eden wasn't really beautiful. "Not really."

"True beauty ought to come from within," Julie said rather plaintively. "Eden's beauty is all splashy and on the surface. It's mostly that stunning figure and that—well, magic chemistry she has with men."

Rena Bradshaw laughed. "If that's not beauty, it's a pretty good substitute, Julie," she said. "You're just kidding yourself. Saying that Eden isn't really beautiful is like saying that the Green Bay Packers can't really play football."

Inwardly, Rena wondered why Julie was so upset about Eden. Was it just the usual reason? Or something special?

That's the way it was. For Eden Storm's inner circle, Eden compelled the fascination that a candle's hot, golden flame has to a room full of butterflies.

Being friends with Eden was no protection. Get close to Eden Storm and you got hurt. But there was this curiosity, this irresistible attraction. You *had* to be near, to know what outrageous thing Eden would do next. The sheer audacity of the woman compelled it.

The Eden Storm saga was familiar to all readers of tabloid newspapers and movie and stage fan magazines. Eden was as tempestuous as her last name. The



fascination of Eden was that she seemed able to break all the rules that make society civilized and get away with it. As an adorable, talented small child, she had been the richest girl in town. In high school, Eden's angelic face and tawny blonde hair had caused her to be elected May Queen. In college, she just moved up to becoming Homecoming Queen.

After college, Eden came to New York, her ambitions centered upon the stage. She was not a polished actress, but something far rarer and harder to find, an exciting personality. Eden's rise was meteoric. Her first husband was Charles Webb, a wealthy theatrical producer past middle age. Webb met Eden, became infatuated with her, divorced his wife of many years to marry her.

For two years, Charles Webb doted upon Eden, taught her what she knew about acting: how to walk, how to dress dramatically, how to use her throaty, come-

hither voice with electrifying effect.

Webb's battery of press agents quickly made Eden a star. They had the raw material with which to work. Eden's personality was all fire and ice, and Eden had an uncanny knack for drawing all eyes to herself, whether onstage or just walking into a room.

Other actresses quickly learned to hate Eden Storm. Eden could not really act well enough to carry the lead of a play. But her personal magnetism was so overpowering that the second leads she played, really glorified bit parts, always stole the show, leaving the hard-working lead actress feeling dowdy and forgotten.

Charles Webb was badly repaid by Eden Storm. Or perhaps he was just repaid in kind for leaving his first wife. In little more than two years, Webb died suddenly of an unsuspected heart condition. Some said it was of a broken heart, caused by Eden's shameless affair with John Terry.

"Of course John's wife knows," Eden replied coolly when her husband confronted her with the facts. "A married man shouldn't have secrets from his wife. Besides, a woman as clever as Laurette would be bound to find out."

Charles Webb died shortly after. Malicious tongues said Eden was so shattered with grief that her hair turned from tawny to ash blonde at inheriting all of Charles' money.

What was to become Eden's favorite cruel hobby—collecting other women's husbands just for the sheer fun and excitement of it—began accidentally.

At a late, after-the-show party one Saturday night, Laurette Terry, a gifted actress with a talent for comic mimicry, had too much to drink. Laurette suddenly unburdened herself of some candid remarks about Eden Storm:

"Eden really can't act a lick," Laurette said quite truthfully. "She can only play one role, Eden Storm."

In hilarious burlesque, Laurette mimicked Eden slithering across a stage, improvised a banal speech in exaggerated imitation of Eden's low, throaty voice that so set male nerve endings twanging.

Laurette's burlesque of Eden was screamingly funny. Even Eden, who was present, laughed. But Eden's green eyes mirrored primitive fury and her revenge was swift.

Turning to an embarrassed John Terry, Eden's bedroom voice purred: "Your wife doesn't seem to like me very much, John."

To smooth things over, John Terry gallantly fetched Eden a drink and began to talk earnestly with her. Eden's green eyes were flatteringly attentive. The bedroom voice, the stunning figure, Eden's magic chemistry with men did their work.

After agonizing months, it was

announced that John and Laurette Terry, the once happily-married theatrical couple, would divorce. Everyone knew the reason was Eden Storm. Just after the sensational announcement was made to the press, Eden, with the disdain of an expert angler throwing back a minnow, announced that she would never, never marry John Terry.

With time, Eden's boldness—and her greed—grew.

Word spread among sophisticated and wealthy men that Eden Storm was to be wooed and her favors won, if at all, not by sweet nothings like romantic words, but by rubies, diamonds, emeralds and pearls, which Eden definitely preferred.

What maddened other women was that Eden never bothered to hide her greed. Rather, Eden flaunted it in the faces of the rich men who courted her. Perversely, the more brazen Eden was, the more intense became the competition between wealthy men to shower her with gifts.

Eden's jewel collection became famous and she unabashedly flaunted her jewels for the whole world to see. Nor did she conceal how she got them.

"Tax free, too, darlings," Eden would gloat to her women friends. "Gifts are tax free to the recipient, you know. The giver pays the gift tax." Her notoriety helped her stage career.

When the mood struck her, Eden

could be the most captivating of women: gay, flattering to the male ego, utterly abandoned in love. But often Eden was rather contemptuous of the rich men who plied her with "little things."

"It's only right that they should give me things, though," Eden said contentedly. "After all, I bring glamor and excitement into their drab little lives."

Eden quickly went through husbands and a succession of lovers. Right now, she was in the process of divorcing Roger Whitworth, her third husband, as soon as the financial details could be worked out.

Roger was being difficult and dreadfully unsporting about the divorce. Especially when Eden's lawyer informed Roger of how many of the Whitworth millions Eden had set her heart on as a property settlement.

"But she's the one who wants the divorce!" Roger exploded.

It was no secret that Roger did not want the divorce. In spite of Eden's open and notorious affairs, Roger Whitworth loved his wife, was crushed by her behavior, offered to take her back if she would only behave.

Eden scorned any reconciliation. "Don't hang on, Roger. Nothing's to be gained by stirring the ashes of yesterday's dead love."

Roger was being difficult about paying millions out in a property settlement for a divorce he did not want and in which he was the inno-

cent party. He could easily have hired private detectives, proved Eden's infidelity, and escaped without paying her anything, but that would cause scandal. It would make him look ridiculous . . . while Eden, who gloried in notorious publicity, wouldn't care. The advantage Eden enjoyed over other people was that they behaved in a civilized way. She didn't.

As Fran McNeal, Julie Stevens and Rena Bradshaw waited for Eden, now a full hour late, they discussed the matter:

"Matrimony plus money equals alimony to Eden," Fran said. "Or rather, a lush property settlement. Eden won't stay unmarried long enough to make alimony worthwhile."

"Well," said Rena, "Eden was the richest girl in that Texas town. Now I suppose she wants to be the richest woman in New York. That takes some doing."

"We might as well order," Julie said. "It looks like she's not going to get here at all. She could at least have called."

Eden's non-appearance cast a pall over the meal. Just as desert was finished, the scarlet-jacketed waiter reappeared. "Telephone call for Mrs. McNeal," the waiter announced pompously, plugged in an extension telephone, set it on the table, and left.

Fran listened for a few seconds, turned pale: "Yes. Yes, of course. Of course, we'll be glad to come."

Then, turning to Rena and Julie, Fran said in a shaken voice: "The most terrible thing's happened! Eden's been murdered. The police want us to come and identify her body. They're sending a police car to pick us up."

Detective Lieutenant Norman Risman, fiftyish, a veteran officer with a florid face, tired grey eyes and thinning brown hair, seemed gently apologetic at subjecting the fashionable ladies to this routine unpleasantness when they arrived at Eden's town house:

"Thank you for coming," Lieutenant Risman said gently. "I'm hopeful that you ladies may be able to help us shed some light on Miss Storm's death."

The murder scene mirrored the luxury in which Eden Storm had lived. Eden's body, covered by a white sheet, lay on a heavy sheepskin rug, dyed pale blue. The heady scent of expensive perfume hung heavily on the air. A bottle of scent had been spilled during the murder. Eden's body lay only slightly distant from an 18th-century, white antique French dressing table that would have done credit to Marie Antoinette.

Lieutenant Risman gravely pulled back the white sheet. Eden's hair, once tawny blonde, but long since dyed a more fashionable ash blonde, was spread in gentle disarray against the pale blue sheepskin rug. She wore black undergarments and a filmy white negligee.

Even in death, Eden's face and figure had spectacular beauty. Her left arm was thrown back in a gesture of defense—and surprise. Gracefully, Eden lay on her right side. Between white shoulder blades protruded the jeweled hilt and several inches of the blade of a ceremonial dagger. The blade was made of a gold and silver alloy.

"Poor Eden! How horrible!" Rena Bradshaw was aghast.

"Can each of you identify the deceased as Miss Storm?"

One by one the women nodded.

"Did any of you ladies actually see Miss Storm today?"

The women glanced at each other. Each, in turn, shook her head.

"No," Fran McNeal said. "We were to meet her for lunch but she didn't show up."

"How about the dagger? Can you give me some information about it?"

"I suppose we all can," Rena said slowly. "It belonged to Eden. She collected jeweled things of all kinds." Eight star rubies adorned the dagger's hilt.

"Foreign, isn't it?" Lieutenant Risman pretended ignorance.

"Persian. It's hundreds of years old," Julie said. "It hung in a jeweled scabbard in Eden's library. All of her friends have seen it."

"Can each of you ladies identify the dagger as belonging to the deceased? Have each of you actually seen it hanging in the library?"

One by one, the women nodded. Lieutenant Risman's tired grey eyes flickered with interest, but his next question was casual.

"I gather Miss Storm kept a great deal of valuable jewelry here?"

"A great deal," Julie agreed.

"Do you have any idea of how much Miss Storm's jewelry was worth?"

The women shook their heads.

"I can tell you," Lieutenant Risman said slowly, "because, we've already talked with the insurance company. Miss Storm's jewels were insured for eight hundred thousand dollars. Their market value is probably a great deal more."

Risman stood up. "Several pieces are missing," he said. "The bulk of the jewelry is still in the safe, which has been opened in the presence of the proper persons, but a diamond necklace, two platinum and diamond clips, and a diamond bracelet, worth, in total, at least eighty thousand dollars, have been stolen."

Then, apparently as an innocent afterthought, Lieutenant Risman added: "If you're wondering what this jeweled dagger is worth, I can tell you that it and the scabbard are insured for thirty-four thousand dollars. The insurance experts tell me that star rubies are worth far more, carat for carat, than diamonds."

"Poor Eden," Fran McNeal said



sadly. "Killed by a common thief."

Lieutenant Risman glanced at Fran with interest. "So it would seem," he said. "But there are a few loose ends. Did you know that Miss Storm and her husband contemplated divorce?"

The women looked at each other.

"Everybody knew that," Fran said.

"It was just a question of money—a property settlement, wasn't it?"

"I don't want to be a tale bearer, Lieutenant. Roger Whitworth is a nice man." Then Fran burst out: "Roger wouldn't kill anybody."

"He hasn't. He was in the presence of witnesses at his office every moment during the time the murder could have been committed."

"I'm glad. Roger's not the type to kill anybody. Not even under provocation."

"Did Miss Storm's husband have provocation, Mrs. McNeal?"

Fran McNeal flushed. "I suppose it's ridiculous these days to speak of outraged husbands. But, yes, Roger had provocation."

"Did Miss Storm have any ene-

mies?" Lieutenant Risman asked the question innocently. "Somebody who might have cause not to like her?"

The question was so innocent! In spite of the grim background of murder, the women smiled.

"Eden wasn't very lovable, Lieutenant. She had many enemies."

"Tell me about it."

"I don't want to be a tale bearer," Fran protested. "Or to say anything that might get anybody in trouble."

"Murder is everybody's business, Mrs. McNeal. The person who killed Eden Storm deserves to be in trouble."

"Very well. Eden had a trail of enemies from Bangor, to Seattle, Washington, without missing many points in between." Briefly, Fran sketched the stories of Eden's escapades, her husbands and love affairs.

When she had finished, Lieutenant Risman nodded.

"We knew most of it," he said. "From the housekeeper and the husband. But thank you for being frank. You supplied some new details."

Then, as gently as before, Lieutenant Risman said: "By the way, Mrs. McNeal, you did a very foolish thing. You lied when you said you hadn't seen Eden Storm today. You visited her at ten this morning and had a furious quarrel with her."

"How did you know?"

"From the housekeeper. She overheard."

Fran McNeal was a spirited young woman. "I didn't have a thing to do with Eden's death, Lieutenant. And I didn't quarrel with her. Not really. I just told her very pleasantly that if I ever saw her give my husband just one more come-hither smile, I'd scratch out both of her lovely, limpid green eyes." Then, rather self-righteously, Fran added: "Now, would you call that a quarrel? I didn't argue with her. I just told her."

"From here," Lieutenant Risman said, "you had an appointment at a beauty salon, which you kept." Then his voice turning softer, Risman said: "The point is, Mrs. McNeal, it's not wise to lie to the police in a serious matter. Certainly not in a murder case. It might be only natural to make something of your falsehood, the quarrel, the spilled perfume. Especially in view of the fact that you use the same scent Miss Storm does."

Fran flushed again. "My husband seems to like it."

"Of course," Lieutenant Risman said soothingly. "It's only natural that when a woman's husband admires something in another woman that she might be tempted to try it herself. Mrs. Stevens copies Miss Storm's clothes, you copy her perfume, and Mrs. Bradshaw has taken to using the exact, same

shade of hair coloring that Miss Storm used. It's very attractive, Mrs. Bradshaw. Most becoming."

All of the three women colored.

"This is a clever crime," Lieutenant Risman said cheerfully. "Would you ladies like to see some clues?"

There was some hesitation. Then they followed as Lieutenant Risman led them to a window fronting out on a courtyard on the third story level. The window pane was broken.

"The killer went to some trouble to make this appear as murder during the course of a jewel robbery," Risman said. "We have the broken window, the missing jewels, which it was well known that Miss Storm kept here. It might be easy to visualize the crime. The thief enters, finds Miss Storm at the dressing table, panics, kills her, and flees with the jewels she has on the table."

"You talk as if it *weren't* a jewel robbery, Lieutenant." Fran McNeal spoke seriously.

"In my opinion, it wasn't." Lieutenant Risman shook his head. "In my opinion, it was planned to look like murder during the course of theft. I doubt we'll ever find Eden Storm's missing diamonds. If my theory is right, the gems are at the bottom of the East River right now, or somewhere else where they'll never be found."

"But why?"

"In my opinion, because the killer was rich. And obviously

clever, to have planted so many false clues. The killer wouldn't risk trying to dispose even of eighty thousand dollars' worth of stolen gems."

There was a long, tense silence.

"The crime was well thought out," Lieutenant Risman said. "But the killer made a mistake. And, once that first mistake was discovered, all sorts of things that don't fit the pattern of murder during the course of robbery became clear."

Nobody broke the stillness until Risman said quietly: "If you don't want to hear more or don't want to say anything, you each have the constitutional right to refuse or to remain silent."

The tension grew.

"This window was broken from the *inside*. Notice how the glass fragments have fallen outside—on the window sill. Strange how a highly intelligent person could forget a simple thing like that—breaking a window from the inside. But I guess the murderer hasn't ever committed a crime before."

Risman paused. "This leads to the theory that the killer was a person well known to Miss Storm, who didn't break in, but was admitted to the house."

The officer walked to where Eden Storm's body lay. The three women followed.

Lieutenant Risman gently drew back the white sheet and pointed to the Persian dagger. "A thief might

leave something as valuable as this. He might panic. He might not want to risk having a murder weapon in his possession. But I personally doubt a thief would have left it. A jewel thief would instantly know its value. If nothing else, the stones could be removed and the gold melted down."

Risman's grey eyes seemed more tired than ever as he went inexorably on: "In police circles, a knife is known as a woman's weapon," he said. "An intruding thief might be much more likely to have hit the victim on the head with a blunt instrument. Furthermore, jewel thieves go to great pains not to kill. Usually, they are the elite of the underworld and do not care to face a murder charge. If there were a jewel thief, he would have been far more likely to force the combination to the safe where the bulk of the jewels were kept from Eden Storm than to have killed her."

The implications of Risman's words were plain.

"Are you accusing one of us of killing Eden, Lieutenant?" Fran McNeal thought it was high time for plain talk.

Lieutenant Risman shook his head. "This is just the investigative phase of the case, Mrs. McNeal. If and when an arrest is to be made, I will so state plainly and inform the accused of her constitutional rights."

Risman indicated the spilled

perfume bottle, lying on the pale sheepskin rug.

"This puzzled us," he said. "Unless, of course, the killer had gone to the trouble of pointing another false clue—like, perhaps, knowing that Mrs. McNeal used the same scent and had visited Miss Storm this morning. And was it only coincidence that the crime occurred during the few minutes that the housekeeper was out?"

The three women looked at each other, shaken.

"Another interesting fact," Lieutenant Risman said. "Eden Storm wasn't stabbed to death. She was smothered by a pillow. The dagger penetrated her back deeply enough to wound, but not to kill. With all of the bones of the back and shoulder, it takes considerable physical strength to kill by a stab in the back."

Risman walked to Eden Storm's luxurious, queen-sized bed, threw back the pale, ice blue satin spread. One of the pillows was gone.

"The missing pillow is at the crime lab," he said. "When the victim was only wounded, she represented a threat to the killer, whom Miss Storm could, of course, recognize if she recovered."

"The medical examiner found the stab wound too slight to kill, found the real cause of death to be suffocation. Tiny bits of lint were found in the deceased's nostrils. Under microscopic examination, they were found to match the lint

on the pillow. The killer quite calmly smothered the wounded Eden Storm, replaced the pillow, made the bed."

More eerie silence.

"The crime lab in New York is good," Lieutenant Risman went on quietly. "Give the technicians just a few tiny bits of physical evidence to go on, and, if a murder is committed just before lunch, they can sometimes have it wrapped up just after desert."

Lieutenant Risman pointed to Eden's outstretched left hand.

"Not unnaturally, there was a bit of a struggle," he said. "Even painfully wounded, the victim tried to force the pillow away from her face, and must have snatched at her assailant's face. At any rate, several human hairs were found clutched in the deceased's hand."

The deep silence was positively chilling.

"Here's where the crime lab is really good," Lieutenant Risman said. "The human hairs in Eden Storm's hand were dyed the exact same shade of Miss Storm's own hair. It would have been easy for the crime lab to assume that it was Eden Storm's own hair. But the crime lab is quite thorough. When the layers of dye were partially

stripped away from the human hairs found in the victim's hand, the texture was found to be coarser than Miss Storm's hair—and the natural color quite a different shade. It was light brown, to be precise."

Lieutenant Risman turned to face Rena Bradshaw. "I now place you under arrest for the premeditated murder of Eden Storm, and advise you of your Constitutional right to remain silent. In fact, Mrs. Bradshaw, I advise you to say nothing until you consult an attorney."

Risman did not want to jeopardize an airtight case by any slip-up on Rena Bradshaw's Constitutional rights. He had other evidence—damning evidence, in his opinion, which he had not revealed to her.

Rena Bradshaw's hands nervously ran through her tell-tale ash blonde hair. She swayed slightly, and seemed about to collapse.

"Do I have to stand trial, Lieutenant? I killed her to protect my home. Can't I just plead guilty to temporary insanity or something like that?"

In spite of himself, Lieutenant Risman smiled grimly. "Don't say anything more, Mrs. Bradshaw. Just call your husband and have him get hold of your lawyer."

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RENT MONEY

Money . . . men . . . life . . . these things she loved above all. Even, she decided wistfully, if someone had to die to give them to her.

by **HAL ELLSON**



SOMETIMES Lil couldn't remember how long she'd lived in the house. The days confused her, years blurred into each other, and the calendar on the kitchen wall didn't help.

Old and yellow, it was marked with penciled notations. Fred, her second husband, had made them, and he was fifteen years in his grave. What had he written? A message for her? Unable to read, she stubbornly refused to ask any one to read her husband's jottings. Like a lost language on an ancient tomb, the words kept their secret, but Lil wasn't bothered.

Let the dead rest in peace, she thought, and picked at some cold chicken, put it away, had herself a cup of tea, then dozed off, to be awakened shortly later by the bell.

She opened the door for her sister Barbara.

They went to the kitchen and Lil poured tea.

"Why so sad looking?" Lil asked. "Are the devils at City Hall raising the taxes again?"

"No," said Barbara, "but there's talk of more riots."

"Oh, that again. People are always talking. I don't take stock in what they say."

"It's in the papers every day. It's not just talk."

"The papers lie," Lil answered. "Anyhow, worrying won't help a bit."

"It might be a good idea to put your coal in early," Barbara suggested.

"I've done that already," Lil smiled.

"Ah, you were always the careful one."

"Well, maybe there'll be a riot, and maybe there won't. Meanwhile, the idea is to go on living. After all, what else is there to do?"

"Yes, what else is there?"

"Both of us have plenty of years ahead," Lil went on. "We're never sick, and look at the stock we're from. Not like the crazy fools around us. They live too fast, die too soon and are always involved with the police, lawyers and all sorts of damned foolishness."

"Sounds like you expect to live forever," said Barbara. "You can't, you know."

"Maybe. But I'm good for a long pull, and I intend to make the best of it. You only live once, you know."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. As to the hereafter, you can have that for yourself. When you die, you die. Meanwhile, I've more important things to worry about, such as this house and the rent from upstairs."

"But you've enough to sit back in comfort, Lil. You have no worries."

"Maybe so, but I'm not letting anything get away from me."

"You were always money-minded," sighed Barbara whose wealth had slipped through her fingers. "But what is money?"

"What is it, hey? Only your

best friend. Have it and you're safe, don't and you're done for. Anyway, I want my rent from the Shelbys."

"A nice quiet couple. Good tenants."

"True, but getting the rent from them is becoming a problem. Mr. Shelby isn't doing too well." Lil shrugged. "What business is he in? He sleeps days and goes off somewhere every night in the week. That's all I know, not having had a word with him in all the years he's lived upstairs."

"He must be a shy one," Barbara put in.

"A good man too. Never raises his voice, never gets drunk, but the rent—I've even lowered it to make it easy for them."

"The proper thing, Lil."

"Sure, but that doesn't mean they're going to take advantage. Not that they've tried. But Mrs. Shelby's always hinting of being hard up for money and too often she's late paying."

"But you get your rent, and that's what counts," Barbara said and stood up.

She had shopping to do and left.

Lil poured another cup of tea and set the pot back on the stove. The front door closed; the house quieted. What should she do about the Shelbys? Tell them to either pay up on time or leave? Glory, why didn't I hit on that before? she thought. Didn't Mrs. Shelby

like her nip? And wasn't there the still in the cellar with whiskey enough to accommodate her?

Footsteps sounded on the stairs and Lil came alert. Ah, it's her, she thought. Coming down for a free nip. Well, she's in for a surprise.

A knock sounded on the door. "Come in," said Lil, and Mrs. Shelby entered, red-haired, buck-toothed and smiling.

"Am I interrupting?" she said, noticing the cups on the table.

"Not at all," said Lil. "We'll go in the parlor."

She led the way, not bringing the decanter of whiskey as she usually did—and Mrs. Shelby noticed. Something in the wind? She waited, and Lil soon brought her plan to light.

"Mrs. Shelby," she began, "you buy your whiskey from Voker. He's a robber, getting rich on everyone."

"Ah, I know, but I've got to have it. It's two nips a day for me, or else—"

Lil nodded. "Two nips, but do you know what you're getting in a place like that?"

"Not the best, but what can one do?"

Lil's eyes flashed. The opening had come. "I make a good thing, you know. Nobody's ever died or got sick from it. I drink it myself, which is more than Voker can say of the rot-gut he sells. Now if you'd rather have mine—"

"I've always been meaning to ask," Mrs. Shelby said with a smile. "But I wondered if it would be proper."

"Perfectly proper," Lil said and left the room.

She returned with a decanter and two glasses, which she proceeded to fill. Mrs. Shelby opened her pocketbook and looked up. "We might as well settle the issue now."

"It'll be fifty cents a shot," said Lil.

Mrs. Shelby placed a crumpled bill on the table, and so it began and continued—two nips a day at a cost of a dollar—and the sugar bowl in Lil's closet began to fill.

As for the rent—no worry about that any more. Mrs. Shelby paid it as regular as a clock and never mentioned financial difficulties.

For a year it continued in that fashion, just the two of them, for Mr. Shelby didn't drink. Besides, he slept during the day, and Lil hardly saw hide nor hair of him.

But one day Mrs. Shelby didn't come down; that was strange enough. Stranger still, no sound came from upstairs. Late in the afternoon, heavy footsteps sounded on the stairs. A loud knocking brought Lil to her feet. She went to the door, opened it and Mr. Shelby stood there, confronting her.

"Will you come upstairs?" he

said. "The missus has passed away."

His matter-of-factness seemed odd. Must be the shock, Lil told herself and she followed him upstairs, half her mind not believing, but it was true. Mrs. Shelby had passed away sitting in a chair.

Mr. Shelby went for the undertaker. The arrangements were made, the body taken away to a neighborhood funeral parlor. No one but Mr. Shelby and Lil attended the wake.

The funeral was simple and, when it was over, they returned to the house. Mr. Shelby went up to sleep for a few hours before going to work.

At five, he came down and went off. A week passed and Lil saw nothing of him; then he drove up to the front of the house in a second-hand car and rang the bell. She let him in, poured him a drink. Hesitating, he accepted it, and put down the glass.

"I might as well get to the point," he said. "There's too many rooms for me to keep. I can't stay up there alone, you know."

Lil nodded. She understood too well. Now there'd be an empty apartment on her hands and no rent coming in. A terrible blow.

"Unless, of course," Mr. Shelby said and paused, smiled at her oddly, his small eyes suddenly as shiny as two pieces of glass.

"Unless I get married," he finished.

To say the least, Lil was a broadminded person, but this shocked her. Only a week since the funeral and here was Mr. Shelby talking of another wife.

"You mean you might get married, don't you?" she said.

"I mean I'll stay on here if you marry me," he said without hesitation.

His bluntness left her speechless for a moment, but she was still his match.

"I'd consider it," she answered, "if you really had something to offer."

"Such as money?" He grinned at her and quoted his assets, which were considerable. "Now would you say that was enough for the two of us to make a go of it?"

It was more than enough, but Lil played him off.

"I'll think it over and let you know," she said.

The next afternoon Barbara dropped in, and Lil announced her forthcoming marriage to Mr. Shelby.

"It's rather sudden, isn't it?" said Barbara.

"Well, at my age it would have to be, wouldn't it?"

"If I'm not mistaken, you'll be seventy-five next month. Now what would a man of fifty want with an old crow like you?"

"Money, of course," Lil said, smiling. "He knows I've got it and

(Please turn to Page 128)

AN AFFAIR OF THE HEART

by
HENRY SLESAR



She was loving, efficient, kind. She wouldn't hurt a flea. Yet to wed her meant death. Why?

DR. HAZLETINE made himself comfortable in Dr. Winkler's waiting room, but comfort wasn't a word he could associate with chrome, plastic, and foam rubber.

Nearing sixty, Hazletine pre-

ferred the overstuffed warmth of his own office to Winkler's swinging Swedish modern, but everything was Image these days, and who knows? Maybe Joel Winkler's patients were reassured by con-

temporary furnishings and related them to the furnishings of Joel's own mind.

He smiled to himself, thinking of telling this theory to Nika at dinner that night; she would laugh and think him clever.

Joel Winkler came out with a grin less enormous than usual. The younger doctor looked tired, his handsome hair ruffled.

"Come in, Charlie," he said, grabbing Hazletine's hand and elbow at the same time. "Sorry to keep you waiting. I got a hypertensive patient. The only time she feels better is when she's talking to me on the phone." He chuckled, and so did his friend.

When they were seated in Winkler's office, Joel traded his grin for a warm spreading smile that made his homely face attractive.

"You son of a gun!" he said. "So you're really taking the plunge. And with my own nurse!"

"You can't say I rushed into it," Hazletine said. "Eighteen years a widower, Joel. That's a long time."

"I don't understand it," Winkler said, making sure the twinkle showed. "Nika's too good for you. She's younger, she's better looking, she's smarter—"

"You know how women are," Hazletine smiled. "They think a doctor's a good catch, even an old crock like me." He took a cigarette out of his pocket but looked guilty about it. "Only the fifth one today," he said.

"I almost fell over when Nika told me the news this morning. I mean, you hit a certain time of life, you don't expect to hear about your bachelor friends getting married. What was it, Charlie? Something you were thinking about for a long time, or did it just—happen?"

"Oh, it was quick, all right. We were out to dinner last night. I don't know—maybe I had one drink too many or maybe it was the candles on the table, but the next thing I knew—"

"You were hooked."

Hazletine laughed. Then he looked solemnly at the cigarette in his hand, and stubbed it out, blowing a long stream of smoke across Winkler's desk blotter.

"The truth is, Joel, for a long time I wasn't so sure about Nika."

"Sure?"

The cigarette was dead, but Hazletine was almost tempted to light another one. He struggled with the temptation for a moment, won, and then leaned back with a sigh.

"She's only worked for you a couple of months. I've known her a good five years. You know she was married before?"

"I heard. A couple of times, I think."

"Three," Hazletine said. "Her first husband was Sam Cernak. Do you remember him? He was a patient of mine."

"No, I don't."

"We consulted on the case. I asked you to look at his EKG and you gave me the same opinion I had."

"Sure, I remember now. The one with that extreme arrhythmia."

"Nika had just come to work for me when Cernak showed up as a patient. He was a widower himself, and they got friendly. After a couple of months, he proposed and she married him. They moved out to Cleveland when Cernak's company moved. He died, I think it was five or six months after the wedding."

"He was a poor risk," Joel Winkler said sadly. "Did you warn Nika how sick the man was?"

"She knew," Hazletine said. "But it was still a shock for her when the end came. She returned here, of course. She didn't know anybody in Cleveland. I even offered her her old job back. You know how efficient Nika is. I never saw anybody prepare such beautiful records, and the nurse I had then was a gum-chewing kid. But her working days were over for a while, she said. Sam's little estate, his insurance, they took care of her needs."

"Did you see much of her back then?"

"Oh, maybe once a month we'd have dinner or see a show. She was still interested in my work, my patients. As a matter of fact, that's how she met Bob Glass, when she

dropped by the office one afternoon. Glass was that fellow Mittenger operated on in Boston, remember that? She was intrigued with what I told her about him, about Glass being an ex-football player, and now walking around with practically half a heart.

"I warned her not to take Glass seriously, not if she didn't want another tragic romance, personally, Mittenger or not, I didn't think Glass would make it, not with his temperament and strenuous ideas about living. But I guess Nika felt sorry for him, and in a few months they were married."

"And Glass died," Winkler said, rather than asked.

"He went fast," Hazletine sighed. "Faster than anybody predicted. They were on a cruise ship coming back from their honeymoon in the Caribbean. Glass was found dead in a deck chair. Terrible for Nika, of course."

Joel Winkler made a dry sound with his lips. He got up and poured himself some water from the cooler.

"Who was the third husband, Charlie?"

Hazletine looked at him.

"You're beginning to feel it," he said. "That same suspicion I got when I learned Nika was engaged for a third time—"

"To another one of your patients?"

"No, not this time. To a man named Simpson, Ray Simpson. He

wasn't my patient; he was Dr. Howells'."

"A heart case then."

"He'd had two bad coronaries when Howell suggested that he see me. I couldn't help the poor man. The walls were like tissue paper."

"And Nika married him?"

"It was Howells who told me about the marriage, which he'd advised Simpson against. When he told me the name of the bride I was surprised, even shocked, I guess. It seemed to confirm my worst fears, that Nika was some kind of—buzzard, feeding off sick men."

"Did you ever explain the coincidence?"

"Well, it wasn't a coincidence, really. I had mentioned Simpson's name to Nika, when she told me that she wanted to go back to work, only in private nursing. Simpson needed somebody, and Nika needed a job. That's all there was to it. And you know what happens so often between private nurses and their unmarried patients. Simpson was a long-time bachelor. But he succumbed to Nika, all right."

"And then he succumbed, period?"

"Yes," Hazeltine said nervously. He took out another cigarette and lit it, this time without comment. "He died only a month after the wedding."

"And he was rich?"

"No, no," Hazeltine said quickly. "Please don't misunderstand,

Joel, Simpson wasn't really *rich*. Neither were the other two. They were fairly well off, and they *did* have sizeable insurance policies. Oh, don't worry, I gave the subject a lot of thought. Especially after Nika came back into my life. To be completely honest with you, Joel, I was a little afraid of her, afraid that she had used me in a peculiar kind of way.

"I was attracted to her, of course. Most men are. She has a way about her, of making a man feel clever and talented and—all those things. And she's intelligent, Joel. You probably don't realize how well read Nika is. She didn't squander all that insurance money; she used it very soundly, made good investments.

"She traveled a lot, went to Europe after Cernak's death. She learned to speak French before the trip, in about two months. Can you imagine? Went to one of those language schools and learned it, just like that. And when you really *know* her, Joel, she can be as sweet and as charming as a sixteen-year-old.

"Look, you know what I'm talking about; a doctor begins to sense things about character, you get a special kind of ability to judge people after a while. That's why I know that I was wrong about Nika, that she wasn't—what I thought she was. She's an angel, Joel, it's a childish description, and God knows I'm no child, but that's what

Nika is. And I'm going to do my darndest to make her happy."

Hazletine put out his cigarette, and met his friend's eyes. "Don't look like that, Joel. I know I'm an old fool, but I love this woman, and I don't think I could if she was a—money vulture or anything like that. You see?" He touched the bulge of his jacket where his cigarettes were.

"After all," he smiled, "you'll have to admit one thing. When it comes to money, I'm not exactly King Midas, am I?"

The younger doctor pushed back his chair.

"All right," Hazletine said. "All right, I know I'm talking too much about it; that's not why I came here. Let's get down to the nitty gritty, as the kids say, Joel. What have you got for me in that nice

white folder of yours? Those fancy-typed records?"

"Yes," Joel Winkler said, in a dull voice. "Nika makes fine-looking records, Charlie. I'll sure hate to lose her."

"Well, what's the story? What do my tests show?"

When Dr. Winkler didn't answer, Dr. Hazletine's mouth opened and his upper plate, never too firm, clicked suddenly against his lowers. He wasn't feeling well. A pain, made familiar by years of description, coursed from his breastbone to his arm. It was the pain that had brought him to his friend's office the week before.

"It's not good, Charlie," Joel Winkler said gravely.

Then he handed Hazletine the folder, so neatly typed, so methodically arranged.

RENT MONEY by Hal Ellson

(Concluded from page 123)

no doubt he's thinking I won't last too long."

Barbara nodded thoughtfully.

"And you," she said. "I'll bet you're up to your old tricks, Lil."

"Well, he does have money," Lil admitted. "Twenty thousand from the insurance and two thousand in the bank. With all that, how could I turn him down? That wouldn't be reasonable. Twenty-two thousand. Ah, a little drink to celebrate?"

"Why not?" said Barbara and up she rose. Glasses and bottles stood on the sideboard. She picked up a bottle.

"Not that one," Lil said.

Smiling, Barbara brought the other and two glasses, filled them and lifted hers.

"To your third husband. Oh, you're the bad one, Lil, killing them all with poison."

"Better them than me," Lil cackled and tilted her glass.

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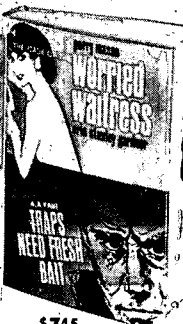
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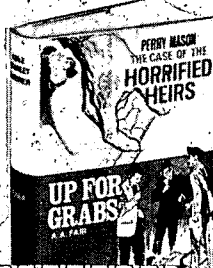


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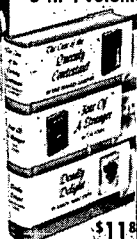


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